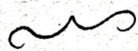


STRANGE LANDS

ROXANE GAY



Recently, after years of avoiding New York City—or, more accurately, not being able to afford it—I traveled there from the small middle-of-nowhere Midwestern town where I teach writing. I was going to give a few readings, meet my new agent, and hang out with friends. I was terrified. I knew I wouldn't be chic enough or thin enough. In the car on the way to the hotel, we were stuck in traffic. Radios blared and exhaust filled the air. Certain things about the city never change. My driver was on the phone having a heated conversation in a language I couldn't recognize. He was clearly on the losing end of the argument. I called my mother to tell her I had arrived safely.

In the 1970s, she and my father came from Haiti to New York separately, my father by way of Montreal. They met at a wedding in New York. They fell in love in New York. They married in New York. I was even baptized in New York, though I've never lived in the city. Back in the day, my parents lived in the Bronx, when the borough still bore the evidence of how it had been ravaged by fire. I remember this detail because they remember this detail, quite vividly. They had little nice to say about the borough, but when they first came

here, they were overwhelmed—new place, new language, so much cold and concrete.

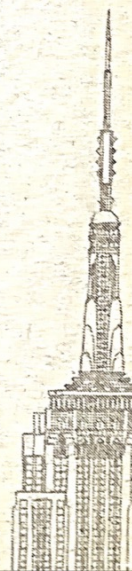
My mom asked me how things were going and I said, "Well, the traffic is interesting." She laughed. She said, "Your father can no longer tolerate that city for long periods of time. He doesn't understand why people would live on top of each other like that."

For a moment, I felt this pang of . . . envy, or maybe wistfulness, because so many of the important moments in their lives happened in New York, because some part of me very much understood why people would live like that.

Throughout my childhood, even though we sometimes visited family in New York, the city seemed more like an idea than a real place—an idea I very much wanted to be a part of—bright lights, big city.

Because of my father's job, we moved often and always lived in suburbs or rural places that bore little resemblance to the sights and sounds of the city. We were in Nebraska or in the suburbs of Chicago or on the outskirts of Denver. We were in the land of sprawling malls and new construction and chain restaurants that advertised with catchy slogans. There was more: we were always the only people who looked like us in our neighborhoods, at school. Not only were we of a different race, but we were of an entirely different culture—Haitians in the middle of America, strangers in a strange world.

My mother has a sprawling family, nine brothers and sisters. My father has four brothers and sisters. When their families immigrated to the United States, most of them settled in New York City, in close proximity to one another. They were determined not to be strangers in a strange land, alone. We'd fly to the city on holidays and cram into my maternal grandmother's apartment, so many of us, my grandmother at the stove cooking Haitian food, making fried plantains in a manner no one else can replicate (the secret is to soak them in salt water before frying), and clucking over her children and grandchildren with great fondness.



Her couches, covered in plastic, the air in her apartment thick with life, us kids always being shushed so we wouldn't disturb the neighbors as if it were possible not to disturb the neighbors when there were twenty or thirty people in a small apartment. New York was my cousins,* who all seemed so sophisticated, who knew the latest slang and wore the latest fashions—Girbaud jeans and leather high-tops and baseball caps. They had sharp haircuts and talked fast, so fast, my brothers and I could barely hold on to anything they said.

New York, then, was Flushing, Queens. It was the 7 train when graffiti flourished—spray-painted bubble words and images stretching from one end of a subway car to another. New York was the Busy Bee market, which was little more than a chaotic swap meet—bright, loud people with thick New York accents selling knockoff bags and shoes, hideous costume jewelry, off-brand toys, cheap electronics—things I had absolutely no use for but considered treasures and embraced, arms wide open. New York was eating real Szechuan food for the first time and understanding that Chinese food prepared anywhere but in New York was not really Chinese food. New York was Times Square, on the cusp of being cleaned up by an ambitious mayor, still dirty enough to be terribly interesting to a young girl.

Men on corners thrusting squares of glossy paper into my hands, bright shining lights, throngs of people as far as the eye could see. Filthy sidewalks and overflowing trash cans, homeless people asking for money and breaking my tender heart. Broadway, the marquees, the names of amazing performers in shining lights, *The Phantom of the Opera*, a boat floating across a stage filled with illuminated candles, voices soaring through the theater and right into me because tragic, somewhat unrequited love is the best kind of love. There was *Starlight Express* and actors roller-skating onstage.

More than anything, New York was seeing people, so many different people, so many beautiful shades of brown, so many different voices, a place where my brothers and I could actually see reflections of ourselves in others, where we didn't feel so strange in the



strange land. New York was everything, and the time we spent in the city was never enough.

In high school, I became determined to attend college there. It was something of an obsession. If I went to school in New York, surely all my problems would be solved. I would learn how to be chic and glamorous. I would learn how to walk fast and wear all black without looking like I was attending a funeral. In adolescence, I was becoming a different kind of stranger in a strange land. I was a theater geek and troubled and angry and hell-bent on forgetting the worst parts of myself. In New York, I told myself, I would no longer be the only freak in the room because the city was full of freaks.

I applied to six or so universities, and one of them was New York University, NYU, the only three letters that existed for me for a time. I was going to go to NYU and major in technical theater and pre-med. It made no sense, but that was the plan. When I was accepted to NYU, with a merit scholarship no less, I was thrilled. My perfect future was within my grasp. Soon I was going to be in the city. I was going to be part of it all. I was going to find my people.

Alas. My parents had other plans for me. They worried that in the city, I would be distracted from my studies, and the point of college, in their minds, was to study. They were worried about safety. They were just plain worried. I remained in a very deep state of denial even after they made me agree to attend a different university, a fancy one even, that I was damn lucky to attend—a state of denial so deep I still haven't recovered from their denying me the choice to attend college in the city. I feel a pang of . . . something, whenever I see an NYU T-shirt or read about the school. I wonder what would have been, though I am fully aware that nothing in my life would be measurably better. The school is my mythical beast, my unicorn. The city is the *one that got away*.

In college, New York was just a couple of hours away by train, Metro North, New Haven to Penn Station. New York was spending the weekend at my roommate's family's apartment and eating bagels from H&H and gourmet delights from Zabar's and reading *The*



New York Times (in New York!) and men shouting "DIANETICS" and thrusting the books of L. Ron Hubbard into my hands and a Haitian woman mistaking me for a well-known voodoo priestess on a sidewalk while my American friend looked on, bewildered, and Lime-light and dancing all night and hungover breakfast at the Time Café and walking through Greenwich Village wide-eyed and Broadway, the performers so glamorous, glittering from the stage, their voices clear and bold, and me, always watching, always wanting desperately to be part of it all, always feeling like "it all" was still just beyond my grasp, wanting so desperately to feel a little less strange.

I wrote my first story when I was four, on a napkin, and eventually advanced to using paper like a normal person, and as my writing ambitions grew so did my fantasies of living in the city, in a lovely apartment with brick walls, lined with books. I'd spend my days in cafés and coffee shops, with a well-worn notebook and my laptop and the latest important book. I would attend readings and rub elbows with the writers I admired most. I'd have cocktails with the editor of *The New Yorker*, and he would be so besotted, he'd ask to see some of my work and I would finally catch my big break. Then I was an adult, or so I was told. I was a writer and finally reached the point where other people knew I was a writer. I was finally more comfortable in my own skin, had finally learned how to feel less strange in a strange land. I had learned the difference between being a writer, which can happen anywhere, and performing the role of Writer, which in my very specific and detailed fantasies could only happen in New York.

New York City is the center of the writing world, or so we're told. New York is where all the action happens because the city is where the most important publishers and agents and writers are. New York is where the fancy book parties happen and where the literati rub elbows and everyone knows (or pretends to know) everything about everyone else's writing career. At some point, New York stopped being the city of my dreams because it stopped being merely an idea I longed to be a part of. New York was very real and very compli-



cated. New York had become an intimidating giant of a place, but still I worried. If I wasn't there as a writer, was I a writer anywhere?

During my most recent visit, I stayed at a hipster hotel, the Ace, because it was the most affordable, which is to say it was not very affordable at all. There appeared to be an unspoken requirement for all staff to look impeccable in expensive jeans and adorn their bodies in tattoos. The lobby was like a nightclub at all hours of the day, loud music, expensive but delicious drinks, a place to see and be seen, whether you wanted to or not.

Somewhere in New York was my agent's very chic office. It looked like a set for an agent's office on a television show or in a movie. The chairs were modern and fancy and it seemed complicated to even sit. I felt very out of place, though I had a good reason to be there. My agent was as chic as her office. I couldn't stop staring because she is very pretty, magazine pretty, and I hadn't realized. I felt that way almost every moment of every day in New York, the writer from the middle of nowhere, surrounded by glamorous and well-dressed people with interesting eyewear.

My agent and I talked for more than an hour, as if we were old friends. I left feeling I was a Writer For Real. I felt fancy. And then, I was walking around trying to find a certain street and it started raining, and I was lost and miserable and confused and no cabs would stop for me. The fancy feeling quickly wore off.

That's what New York was becoming now that I could choose to be in the city or not. There were teaching jobs and other opportunities in New York. I had, just before the visit, turned down an editorial position at a magazine because I couldn't fathom living in the city on the offered salary. In my thirties, I've found that I am not as interested in struggling or suffering as I once was, at least not from one day to the next. During that recent trip, I realized I need at least one part of my life to be easy. I may hate living in the middle of nowhere, but there's a lot of wide open space for that hate to thrive in. For every lovely moment with lovely people in New York, there was a deeply humbling moment—getting lost, trying to hail a cab in the

rain, dealing with the constant crush of people, feeling desperately out of place among so many sophisticated, beautiful people. These moments revealed just how big and overwhelming the city was. They showed me how New York was always more than an idea, even if I wasn't able to see that. New York was a strange land, and I was still a stranger and would always be one. Overall, that visit was fun. The city was good to me and I looked forward to returning and soon. But there was nothing for me to say goodbye to in New York because I never truly said hello. I became a writer without all the glamorous or anti-glamorous trappings of New York life I thought I needed.

When my plane took off and I knew I was returning to the middle of nowhere, a different kind of strange land, I realized with startling clarity that my small town in Illinois felt less strange than the city. I was relieved. I was going home.