

What I've learned.

New York, September 2013 - November 2013

I

New York is a city which constantly fast forwards itself. People rush by, overtake each other, replace each other, erase each other, women on high heels, teenagers in expensive sneakers, groups of twenty-somethings with baseball hats, iphones, colourful make-up, high-rise hairdos. There are so many young people in the streets, as if they are constantly reproducing themselves. Cars honk. The lights at the intersections are mere suggestions. And the stretching of muscles at the fitness studio is like slapstick, it goes so fast. Only I'm standing still. Things fall out of my hands. I'm being bumped into. Honked at. I'm the obstacle. I talk slowly, stretch slowly. I don't fit. A young woman who overtook me today wore a t-shirt which said on the back: *There is a reason why you are behind me.* Absolutely I thought. Only I would love to know what.

II

The most striking object in my apartment is the air conditioner. It dominates the large, rather empty rooms, and sometimes its louder than the noise in the streets. When I arrived, there was sand on the floor. There was sand in the towels, although I was told, they had been washed. It was fine sand, almost invisible, there was only this soft scrunch under the soles of my flipflops in every room.

Back home they told me: New York is a city by the sea. You are lucky! In September, the weather will still be beautiful.

I haven't heard a seagull since I arrived. Not one. All I hear are the sirens of the police. What I see is concrete. After a long walk, I reach water that looks more like a liquid highway to me with hundreds of vehicles, busy bridges and shores made for cars, construction sites, torn asphalt, dirty sidewalks and high rise buildings made of glass and steel. But something tells me, the sea must be there. Somewhere at some last Metro-stop there will be the smell of salt and fish, and it doesn't come out of a restaurant. So I look at these towels and I notice the particles being blown out of the air conditioner into my room and I know: beaches are the Fata Morgana of Manhattan reinforced by the reality of the dust.

I keep writing letters to people saying New York makes me miss Helsinki. Their responses are reluctant, almost reproachful. A friend who lives in Finland is happy to hear that somebody could possibly miss Helsinki, but while in New York? Sounds suspicious. As if I wasn't telling her the truth, or as if I had said something indecent. Helsinki is a dark, cold, under-populated city in the north, New York is: Enjoy!

I've finally heard a seagull. Even caught a glimpse of one. It was in Battery Park, where the currents from the rivers flood the delta from both sides. The gangways to the ferries scrape back and forth against the pier. I stood facing the wrong direction. Helsinki was somewhere behind me.

The seagull sat on a wooden post, watching a little boy who stood on an iron drain in the ground. The water shoots under the concrete pier and when the waves break, wind and the sprays from the sea rush out of the drain and into the air. The boy stood straddle-legged above the drain. He was waiting for the waves to roll in. He couldn't see them. But the sea breeze from below the concrete blew into his short pants like a sudden storm and pushed his yellow t-shirt way up over his belly. Each time a wave crashed against the fundamentals of the city his hair stood straight in the air for a second as if he was flying.

IV

When I lived in New York in the mid-nineties I worked in a small theatre close to the Hudson river. A woman ran the theatre. She hired different directors who staged the plays she had written. The actors came from all over the country. They knew there were agents in the audience looking for new faces for Broadway. They played the roles which they felt suited them best - the lover, the beast, the drunk, the rich girl - no matter what play.

Sometimes at night I went out to parties. Once I got yelled at on the dancefloor of a club. It hadn't occurred to me that it was a party designed for black people. And I hadn't felt white before I stepped onto this dancefloor.

Something seems to always interfere with your ideals in this city. It tires people out.

The girl at the counter of my gym has applied glittering snow on her eyelashes all around her eyes. Up close it becomes visible that there are cracks and holes under the white beautiful patches. In the streets I see the most elegantly dressed ladies and cant stop thinking about the place, they will return to; a one-bedroom apartment with a broken toilet, cracks in the walls, rattling windows. The woman in front of City Hall whom I saw yesterday didn't even try anymore to be elegant. She squatted down on the sidewalk and peed while people were leaving a bus in front of her. Nobody looked, as if to avoid interference with whatever they pursued, and everybody pursues more than one thing.

In a one-to-one Pilates class I was told that for women emotions go through their hips.

I have to do a lot of hip movements while in New York.

V

"This heat totally changes the meaning of being baked" reads a commercial in the subway. While fighting my way out of the underground subtropics, I'm still thinking about the perspective from which this is told.

There are lots of shops in my area. Arts and crafts stores and branches of big brands and outlets and retailers and boutiques that resemble the boutiques in the street around the corner with jeans and coats and shoes and leather bags mirroring yet another street, only in reverse order, and there is always the same silver-grey little truck parked in front that sells enchiladas and burritos, and I'm always tempted to buy one, but never do, since there is a suspension of the FDA's food safety inspection program, due to the government shutdown, and the food safety control is now being run by a little over half of its already too-small staff, so nobody has a clue what's in the meat anymore.

In one of the boutiques I found a jacket. It was a beautiful elegant black jacket that cost about the same amount I earn for a reading. I tried it on and asked the salesperson what kind of fabric it was made of. He answered: "As soon as you put it on, I saw: that's you! Fits you like a glove. It's so perfect! Do you like it?"

I did like it and I forgot to ask about the fabric again. But then I saw a little white spot on the upper left sleeve. I asked about that. The salesperson gave the jacket to an assistant and he took a lint remover and rubbed it over the fabric. It didn't work. A girl, who seemed to be the second shop assistant, came and used her nails, yet the white spot wouldn't disappear. The shop assistant offered to order a new one from another of their stores, which didn't seem to be difficult, as it was just around the corner. While I was writing down my phone number the girl with the nails came back. "It's gone", she said convincingly. "Really. You don't see anything anymore. And this jacket", she lowered her voice, "is made for you!" I must have been too slow in showing my excitement, because she added almost offended: "I worked on it a long time." Guiltily, I took out my credit card. But then I remembered my mother, when she wants to buy a piece of clothing, she'd examine it in daylight. The girl with the nails accompanied me outside and when I looked closely, I discovered a little brownish spot instead of the white spot. She had used a pen to color it. She painted over this designer jacket that was worth a reading as if it was a child's coloring book.

New York, I realized, is all about conviction. It doesn't matter what the jacket is made of, or what's in the meat, as long as you are persuasive.

VII

Times Square is the darkest place in town - the High Line is the lightest.

Times Square is a consequence of Wall Street, all screaming lights and cheap stuff for sale sold by grey-toned people, an Armageddon-esque atmosphere of tired Statues of Liberty and Batmans lining the street who push their false heads up over their skulls and stare bored at their cellphones, until the next group of Chinese school girls stuff some dollars in their hand for a picture with them. A friend who stood with me under the blinking lights said, “even the sun looks dirty and old here.”

The High Line’s Landscape architecture is inundated with a silvery light, that falls between the white stems of birch trees and the big leathery green leaves of exotic bushes that have been carefully planted between the tracks of an old railroad, the iron structures of a former cargo train still hover above the streets. But they are artfully overgrown with flowers and fruit trees – a garden for people to hang-out- reinterpreted by artists, and even the views have been carefully designed. The sundeck chairs made of smooth wood outside the train station turned into a café in “Chelsea’s Grasslands” are free. And that is the lightest notion about this Life Line, this Light Line, this railroad to equality, or so it might seem in a country where only the rich still seem to consider health insurance a socialist threat: that beauty is accessible for everybody.

At Columbus Circle subway station a young guy came up to me and offered me a manuscript. He said, it's a copy of his latest short story and usually he sells it, but he would just give it to me, because I looked like a real reader. He showed me the blurbs on the back of the copy from Village Voice, New Yorker magazine, Playboy, praising his writing. There wasn't an authors name on the front page or on the back, which should have made me suspicious. But I admired his bravery, outing himself as a writer to strangers in a train station. I admired him counting on fortuna to eventually meet the one among thousands who appreciates his writing skills, who will then recommend him to a big publishing house, make him the new talk of the town. And I was curious. I'm always in search for a challenging book to translate.

He said I could keep the copy, but he wants a donation. I agreed with that and gave him my few last dollars. He looked at me. "That doesn't even cover the production costs", he said, holding out his hand.

All of a sudden I saw myself one day walking the streets with a copy of my latest novel, worn at the edges, trying to convince people to give me some cash for it. I wouldn't expect them to read it, I would be beyond these hopes. The ability to read is already starting to get lost, and at that point my concerns would only regard existential matters.

I felt dirty. I told him to keep the cash and his manuscript. It was humiliating for both of us.

When I walked up the stairs from the A-train-subway on 14th street, there was a little bronze statue at the end of the handrail. A figure holding an opened book sitting on top of a fat person, who looks like an old style banker. The banker is sprawled over a mountain of coins. The guy with the book is riding him. Or he is holding the banker down.

It is a tiny sculpture. Most people rushed by and didn't notice it. To me it was a revelation. In the act of reading, it seems to suggest, money doesn't matter. The guy at Columbus Circle wasn't a writer. He probably worked in a copy shop and this was his spiel. He simply counted on the old style believe of real readers, that writing has value. He thought, he could cash in on this believe.

High hopes, where in fact me, the real main character of his fiction, couldn't even afford to buy his short story.