

It was war over; so was the shortage of building materials and from the windows of our apartment near Sutton Place we could see the horizon beginning to change. Everybody was home who was coming back, the girls still had their dewy furloUGH looks and, after the smoking and carious ruins of Manila, the City of New York with the sky pouring its light onto the rivers looked like a vision of enlightenment. 4My children were young and my favorite New York was the one they led me through on Sunday afternoons. A girl in high heels can show you Rome, a drinking companion is the best for Dublin, and I enjoyed the New York my children knew. They liked the Central Park lion house at four o'clock on February afternoons, the highest point of the Queensboro Bridge, and a riverside dock in the East Forties, long gone, where I once saw a couple of tarts playing hopscotch with a hotel room key. Oh, it was a long time ago. You could still hear the Oklahoma! score during drinking hours, the Mink Decade was just taking hold and the Third Avenue El still rattled the dishes in Bloomingdale's. The East River views were broader then and there was an imposing puissance to those reaches of light and water. We used to ride and play touch football in Central Park and, in October, with the skiing season in mind, I used to climb the ten flights of stairs to our apartment. I used the back stairs, the only stairs, and I was the only one to use them. Most of the kitchen doors stood open and my



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NEW YORK, NEW YORK

MOVING OUT

OCTOBER 1, 1973 | JOHN CHEEVER

MOVING OUT

“...the rich of the city were getting richer and the friable middle ground where we stood was vanishing”

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John Cheever, a native New Yorker, won the 1958 National Book Award for his novel, The Wapshot Chronicle. This reminiscence of his leaving the city and moving to Wapshot territory was published in July, 1960.

climb was a breach of privacy, but what could I do? I used to whistle and sometimes sing to warn the tenants of my approach, but in spite of these precautions I once saw a lady wearing nothing but a girdle while she basted a leg of lamb, a cook drinking whiskey out of a bottle, and a housewife sitting on the lap of the sallow-faced delivery boy from the corner butcher's. On Christmas Eve my children and their friends used to sing carols on Sutton Place—mostly to butlers, everyone else having gone to Nassau, which may have been the beginning of the end.

It was a wonderful life and it didn't seem that it would ever end. In the winter there were those days with a smart polish on the air and the buildings, and then there were the first south winds of spring with their exciting and unclean odors of backyards and all the women shoppers walking east at dusk, carrying bunches of apple blossom and lilac that had been trucked up from the Shenandoah Valley the night before. A French-speaking panhandler used to work Beekman Place (Je le regrette beaucoup, monsieur . . .), and going out to dinner one night we ran into a bagpiper on the Lexington Avenue subway platform who played a Black Watch march between trains. New York was the place where I had met and married my wife, I had dreamed of its streets during the war, my children had been born here and it was here that I had first experienced the feeling of being free from social and parental strictures. We and our friends seemed to **improvis** our world and to meet society on the most liberal and spontaneous terms. I don't suppose if you were a day, an hour, when the middle class got their marching orders, but toward the end of the 1940's the middle class began to move. It was more of a push than a move and the energy behind the push was the changing economic character of the city. It would all be easier to describe if there had been edicts, proclamations and tables of statistics, but this vast population shift was forced by butcher's bills, tips, increased rental and tuition costs and demolitions. Where are the Wilsons? you might ask. Oh, they've bought a place in Putnam County. And the Renshaws? They've moved to New Jersey. And the Oppers? The Oppers are in White Plains. Their wrens were thinning and we watched them go with commiseration and some scorn. They sometimes returned for dinner with mud on their shoes, the women's faces red from weeding the vegetable garden. My God, the suburbs! They encircled the city's boundaries like enemy territory and we thought of them as a loss of privacy, a cesspool of conformity and a life of indescribable dreariness in some split-level village where the place name appeared in The New York Times only when some bored housewife blew off her head with a shotgun.

That spring, at the closing assembly of my daughter's school, the headmistress took the lectern and announced: “Now school is over and we are all going to the country!” We were not going to the country and the exclamation fascinated me because hidden somewhere in her words was a sense, an apprehension of the fact that the rich of the city were getting richer and the friable middle ground where we stood was vanishing. The river views at any rate were vanishing and so were most of the

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landmarks. Down went a baronial old brewery, up went a deluxe apartment house. Building began on a lot where we used to run the dog and most of the small and pleasant houses in the neighborhood, where people who were less than rich could live, were marked for demolition and would be replaced by the glass towers of a new class. I could see the landscape of my children's youth destroyed before my eyes; and don't we impair the richness of our memories with this velocity of reconstruction? The apartment house where we lived changed hands and the new owners prepared to turn the building into a cooperative, but we were given eight months to find another home. Most people we knew by then lived either in River House or in downtown tenements where you had to put out pots to catch the leaks when it rained. Girls either came out at the Colony Club or came out, so to speak, on the river embankments, and my sons' friends either played football for Buckley or practiced snap-knife shots in the shadows of the bridge.

That was the winter when we never had enough money. I looked for another apartment, but it was impossible to find a place for a family of five that suited my wife and my income. We were not poor enough for subsidized housing and not anything like rich enough for the new buildings that were going up around us. The noise of wrecking crews seemed aimed directly at our residence in the city. In March one of the obligations that I couldn't—or at least neglected to—meet was the electric bill and our lights were turned off. The children took their baths by candlelight and, while they enjoyed this turn of events, the effect of the dark apartment on my own feelings was somber. We simply didn't have the scratch. I paid the light bill in the morning and went out to Westchester a week later and arranged to rent a little frame house with a sickly shade tree on the lawn.

The farewell parties were numerous and sometimes tearful. The sense was that we were being exiled, like so many thousands before us, by invincible economic pressures and sent out to a barren and provincial life where we would get fat, wear ill-fitting clothes and spend our evenings glued to the television set. What else can you do in the suburbs? On the night before we left we went to Riverview Terrace for dinner where I jumped, in an exuberance of regret, out of a first-story window. I don't think you can do that anymore. After the party I walked around the city, beginning my farewells. The customary tinder lights beat up from the streets onto the low clouds overhead. On a sidewalk somewhere in the Eighties I saw a Cuban going through the steps of a rumba, holding a baby in his arms. A dinner party in the Sixties was breaking up and men and women were standing in a lighted doorway calling goodbye and good-night. In the Fifties I saw a scavenger pushing an enormous English perambulator—a carriage for a princess—from ash can to ash can. It was part of the city's imprimatur. It was in the spring and there was a heady, vernal fragrance from Central Park, for in New York the advance of the seasons is not forgotten but intensified. Autumn thunderstorms, leaf fires, the primeval stillness that comes after a heavy snowfall and the randy smells of April all seem magnified by the pavings of the greatest city in the world.

The moving men were due at noon and I took another melancholy walk. I had my shoes shined by a pleasant Italian who always described himself as a dirty-minded man. He blamed it on the smell of shoe polish which he claimed had some venereal persuasions. He had, like many men of his kind, a lively mind and possessed, along with the largest collection of nudist magazines I have ever seen, some exalted memories of Laurence Olivier as Hamlet, or Omletto as he called him. Standing in front of our apartment house was an old lady who not only fed and watered the pigeons that then lived around the Queensboro Bridge, but whose love of the birds was jealous. A workman had put the crusts of his meal onto the sidewalk for the birds and she was kicking the crusts into the gut-

ter. “You don't have to feed them,” she was telling him. “You don't have to worry about them. I take care of them. I spend four dollars a week on grain and stale bread and in the summer I change their water twice a day. I don't like strangers to feed them. . . .” The city is raffish and magnificent and she and the shoeshine man would be advocates of its raffishness— those millions of lonely but not discontented men and women who can be overheard speaking with great intimacy to the chimpanzee in the zoo, the squirrels in the park and the pigeons everywhere. That morning the air of New York was full of music. Bessie Smith was singing Jazzbo Brown from a radio in the orange-drink stand at the corner. Halfway down Sutton Place a blind man was playing Make Believe on a sliding trombone. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, all threats and revelations, was blowing out of an upstairs window. Men and women were sunning themselves on Second Avenue and the vision of urban life seemed to be an amiable one, a bond of imponderables, a shared risk and at least a gesture toward the peaceableness of mankind, for who but a peaceable species could live in such congestion? Fredric March was sitting on a bench in Central Park. Igor Stravinsky was waiting at the corner for the light to change. Myrna Loy was coming out of the Plaza and on lower Sixth Avenue E. E. Cummings was buying a bunch of bananas. It was time to go and I got a cab uptown. “I'm not sleeping,” the driver said. “I'm not sleeping anymore. I'm not getting my rest. Spring! It don't mean nothing to me. My wife, she's left me. She's shackled up with this fireman, but I told her I'll wait for you, Mildred, I'll wait for you, it's nothing but bestiality you feel for this fireman and I'm waiting for you, I'm keeping the home fires burning. . . .” It was the idiom of the city and one of its many voices, for where else in the world will strangers bare their intimate secrets to one another with such urgency and such speed—and I would miss this.

Like so much else in modern life the pathos of our departure was concealed by a deep cartilage of decorum. When the moving van had closed its doors and departed, we shook hands with the doorman and started for the country ourselves, wondering if we would ever return.

As it happened we returned the next week for dinner and continued to drive back into town regularly to see our friends. They shared our prejudices and our anxieties. “Can you bear it?” we would be asked. “Are you all right out there? When do you think you can get back?”

And we found other evacuees in the country who sat on their suburban lawns, planning to go back when the children had finished college; and when the rain fell into the leaves of the rock maples they asked: “Oh, Charlie, do you think it's raining in New York?”

Now on summer nights the smell of the city sometimes drifts northward on the waters of the Hudson River, up to the wooded, inland banks where we live. The odor is like the stales from an enormous laundry, although I expect that an incurable evacuee could detect in it Arpege, stone-cold gin, and might perhaps even imagine that he heard music on the water; but this is not for me. I sometimes go

back to walk through the ghostly remains of Sutton Place where the rude, new buildings stand squarely in one another's river views and where the rents would make your head swim, but now my old friends seem insular in their concern about my exile, their apartments seem magnificent but sooty, like the scenery for the national or traveling company of a Broadway hit, and their doormen only remind me of the fact that I don't have to tip a staff of twenty at Christmas and that in my own house I can shout in anger or joy without having someone pound on the radiator for silence. The truth is that I'm crazy about the suburbs and I don't care who knows it. Sometimes my sons and I go frothing for perch in the Hudson, and when the trains for the city come bowling down along the riverbanks I salute the sometimes embarrassed passengers with my beer can, wishing them Godspeed and prosperity in the greatest city in the world, but I see them pass without a trace of longing or envy. -Hf

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