

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

# THE LOWS OF THE HIGH LIFE

*I had never had money, and then I did. For three days in New York, I learned how not to use it.*

By Andre Dubus III

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Photograph by Larry Towell / Magnum



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**I**t's the summer of 2001, and I'm trying to check into the Royalton on Forty-fourth Street, but my credit card has been declined. The receptionist is in a silk blouse, and she glances behind me at my road-tired, happily expectant family: at my wife and three young kids, at my mother and older sister, her toddler daughter in her arms.

"I'm sorry, sir. Is there another I might use?"

On her face is an expression I know well, for I grew up with it. It was on the faces of the mechanics who'd shake their heads at my young single mother when she asked if she could pay for a car repair in installments; it was on the faces of teenagers working the cash registers at grocery stores when, once again, the total would be too much, and I and my siblings would have to set aside the eggs and the peanut butter, the apples and the cans of soup, sometimes even the milk; it was on the faces of gas-station attendants when my mother would scour through her purse and ask for "A dollar and thirty-seven cents worth of gas, please"; and it was on the faces of landlord after landlord as they stood in our doorways asking for the rent, which was late yet again.

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Now, on this hot evening in the lobby of the Royalton, I ask my mother and my sister if they have a credit card for the deposit. They do not, but my mother, sixty-three years old and still working, her hair just beginning to gray, is smiling at me. She knows that this time will be different.

I say to the woman at the desk, "Will you take cash for a deposit?"

“Well, that would be a sizable amount, sir.”

“How much?”

She looks at me as if I can’t be serious. “Four thousand dollars.”

I reach into my backpack, pull out a wad of cash, and begin laying down forty hundred-dollar bills. At first the woman acts as though I’m doing something obscene. But then she’s all business. She sweeps the bills into an envelope, and now her expression is a different one altogether. It’s one that I’m still not used to. It says, “Welcome. Please, won’t you come in?”

Our rooms are suites, air-conditioned marvels with king-size beds and colorful pillows, with deep sofas and chairs, with paintings on the walls that look like real art, and with tubs that can easily hold all of our kids and at least one grownup. But there isn’t time for that. We need to get cleaned up, and then climb into the stretch limousine I’ve hired to take us to LaGuardia to pick up my blind aunt Jeannie. It’s why we’re here in the first place, to celebrate her seventieth birthday.

The plan came to me when I called Jeannie back in November. I was in northern Massachusetts, sitting in my brand-new pickup truck, and she was down in Kentucky, where she lived near her eldest son. She had reminisced about all the places she’d lived: Louisiana, Texas, Mexico, Oklahoma, Australia, even Brussels. Yet she had never been to New York City.

“Really? Not even the airport?”

“Maybe the airport, but that’s it.”

The truck I was sitting in still had that new-car smell, and I couldn't believe that I owned it. I had been writing daily for nearly twenty years, and now my third published book had become a major best-seller, and I—who at forty-one had never had more than three hundred dollars in the bank, whose mother once had to prepare for me and my siblings a dinner of saltine crackers spread with butter—heard myself telling my dear aunt Jeannie that I was going to fly her first class to Manhattan, to celebrate her birthday in style. I wasn't sure what "in style" meant, except that it should have something to do with the word "luxury." When I typed that into my computer, I was led to the Royalton and then to the Plaza, where we'd be staying our second and third nights in the city.

Like nearly all my relatives, Jeannie was from Louisiana. In her late forties she became a widow, and in her fifties she lost her eyesight, but she was still active in her progressive church. She cooked her own meals and listened to biographies and the *New York Times*. To everyone she met, she was warm and friendly, her blindness somehow not robbing her of her gratitude to simply be alive, which is on full display as our family cruises away from the airport.

Sitting in low, plush seats, Herbie Hancock on the stereo, I pour my aunt a glass of her favorite bourbon and hand it to her with a kiss on her cheek. The sun is down, and, as the silhouetted skyscrapers of Manhattan come into view, my oldest two kids take turns describing them to her. She's sitting next to my mom, both of them laughing and sipping, smiling in wonder.

Seeing them so close together brings back another image: my aunt and her husband wedged on the only living-room furniture my family owned, a yard-sale wicker settee, my mother sitting across from them in her own wicker chair. At the time, my aunt and uncle lived down in Texas, in a house filled with long, soft couches and leather recliners. Parked under their carport was my uncle's new sedan and my aunt's Opel GT. It was rare for them to visit us in our Massachusetts mill town, and, in the days before their arrival, my mother bought a pot roast she could not afford, along with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label.

Now the roast was cooking, its holiday scent filling the house, and my engineer uncle sat in his blazer on that squeaking settee, sipping his Scotch from a jelly glass.

Somehow the subject of money came up. After my parents' divorce, my mother took any job she could find: a waitress, a nurse's aide. Since earning her degree, her work had been helping poor families—first as a director of Head Start, and now as a lead-paint inspector for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, often taking slumlords to court. She said with some pride that she was making twelve thousand dollars a year, the most she'd ever earned.

"Twelve thousand dollars?" my uncle said. "With four kids? Nobody can live on twelve thousand dollars. Hell, I make sixty and that ain't enough."

*Sixty? Sixty thousand dollars?*

I lean toward the limo's glass divider and ask the driver to take the long way to midtown. My aunt can still see what's in the periphery of her vision, and I want her to take in the lighted buildings as we head down F.D.R. Drive, the East River glistening to our left. Sinatra's singing now, and, while I'm talking and laughing, topping off my aunt's drink, she says something like "Well, this is already the best summer vacation I've ever had."

And we haven't even got to our hotel yet, or the restaurant we'll be going to later. In my research, I discovered something called Michelin-starred restaurants, places so fine and rare there were no prices on the menus. That night, and the next two, we'd be going to three of them. But the phrase "summer vacation" is in me like a rusty hook.

Growing up, summer vacation simply meant no school. As I got older, I would meet people who'd gone to camps, whose families could fly to Disney World or Europe, who rented cottages on the ocean. But all I and my siblings did was roam the backstreets of our town, trying to avoid trouble or go looking for it. Once, my mother bought a few fishing poles and a small tent on layaway. She packed a cooler with sandwiches and Cokes, and the five of us spent three days in a campground close to the highway. The brook near us was shallow, lined with car tires and empty beer cans. Just a few yards behind us was a family's camper, and I remember the wife yelling at her husband a lot, and their TV blaring as we tried to sleep on the roots of a big pine tree. We caught no fish, but we cooked hot dogs over a little fire. We drank too many Cokes.

Now, in Times Square, the tinted windows of our limo come alive with bright neon, and the kids let out such happy sounds that I lean over and kiss them. We eat dinner under a high ceiling of hanging Italian linens, the waiters in tuxedos. When the bill comes, the total is more than I used to make in a month, but I pull out my cash and tip forty per cent. On the way out, I give the busboy a hundred.

At the Royalton, I hand my mother and aunt four hundred dollars each, for pocket money. My aunt kisses and thanks me, then folds the bills and pushes them down her bra. She will eventually lose the cash, and I will hand her four more hundred-dollar bills. "Good Lord, Andre," she'll say. "I'm going to leave this trip with more money than I brought with me."

The next day is cloudless and humid, and we take one of those open-topped-bus tours so that Jeannie can hear and smell and feel the city. The bus drops us off in Chinatown. The day has become hotter, and we walk through narrow streets that smell of rotted produce and pigeon shit. We find a restaurant that is also hot, with a standup fan blowing warm air. We eat quickly, and there comes the deflating feeling that for the past twenty-four hours I've been the master of a grand circus, but now half the tent is collapsing and some of the lions are getting out. I wave a fly from my face and pay the bill.

We walk down the shadeless sidewalks of Canal Street, heading for Little Italy. Taxis and trucks drive by. We pass a bald man in a visor hawking dozens of sunglasses. Beside him, on the concrete, is a thin woman with dreadlocks, a sheet in front of her covered with old paperbacks and a box of candlesticks. I want to make a contribution, but my wife and kids are walking ahead, and the sun is on us too directly. I'm sweating, and I see that my mother and aunt are sweating, too. My niece has begun to cry, and my sister picks her up and says to me, "Maybe we can cool off somewhere?"

It's what we used to do if our mother had one of her Head Start vans for a summer weekend. She'd take us on what she called a Mystery Ride, which was really just a chance to put on the van's A.C., if it was working, and get out of our neighborhood of peeling clapboards and cracked windows. Sometimes she'd drive us to back roads lined with deep woods, or north up the coast, the ocean smelling like some bright, expansive future.

But, one July night, all five of us in the van, the engine took a long time to start, and when it did my mother couldn't go faster than ten miles an hour. Finally, she had to leave it in the street, and we climbed out and trudged back to our hot, airless house.

**T**hat feeling, of a magic promise shattered, is coming back to me now. But near the corner of Mulberry Street we find an air-conditioned restaurant, its interior dark walnut, and suddenly I sense it again, all that money in my account. While the ladies order iced teas and the kids get root-beer floats, I step outside and call the Plaza. I hear myself telling the concierge that we have three suites reserved for the next two nights, and is there any way they can send a car to the corner of Mulberry and Canal?

The concierge does not check the useless credit card I used to hold the suites. He says, “Yes, sir. I’ll send a car right away.”

The car is another stretch limousine, and it pulls up before the kids have even finished their floats. The driver is a handsome young man, and, as he holds the door open, bowing slightly, I push two hundreds into his hand.

A piano concerto is playing inside, and there are strips of purple light in the padded ceiling. The bar’s stocked with ice and glasses and bottles of water. I pour some for my aunt and my mother, and they smile at me with such pride that I have to look away.

My wife, Fontaine, leans close and says, “Honey, can we afford all this?”

“Of course. It’s crazy, but yes, we can.”

In her voice, though, I hear a note of warning. She grew up in a family with little money herself, and maybe she sees what I do not yet see, that all this abundance has made me a little insane. In the past few months, I’ve given a lot of money to a lot of people. When I discovered that my best friend’s mother-in-law had never been to a Red Sox game at Fenway, I bought her and a dozen of her loved ones tickets, and then we took a limo into Boston, where I gave everyone two hundred dollars each for beer and hot dogs. When another friend needed a loan, I gave him the money as a gift.

But, for some time now, I’ve felt deeply disoriented, as though I’m walking on a ship rocked by high seas. Many times a day I’ve had to sit down, close my eyes, and take deep breaths. I reach for a fork and my fingers drop it. I don’t sleep much. Before all of this, anxiety was Fontaine’s problem. To support my writing and her work as a modern dancer, we cobbled together a string of temporary jobs. I worked as a carpenter and adjunct professor of writing; she taught dance classes and learned to upholster furniture. But we often came up short, and late at night she’d find herself unable to sleep, thinking about how we owed the electric

company \$34.75 by Friday. She'd say this to me in a small voice in the dark, and I'd tell her not to worry: I had just got a new deck-building job, and, yes, we'd be late, but not by much. It felt like we were speaking the language of scarcity, the only language we had ever known.

For ten years, we have been renting a dark, narrow half-house with lead paint peeling off the clapboards, the landlord refusing to address it. There's one bathroom, and its pipes leak down into the kitchen, the wallpaper behind the stove bubbled and streaked. When my book took off, Fontaine quickly found us two acres of land. For me, the money meant time to write; I never imagined it would change how we actually lived. This was how I'd grown up. But we made a down payment, borrowed the rest, then hired my brother Jeb to design a house for us to build.

Now a different kind of anxiety was keeping me awake. I had never known this kind of wealth, and who *was* I if I lived like this?

Our suites at the Plaza make our rooms at the Royalton seem cramped. There are high, vaulted ceilings and carved antique furniture. The living rooms are palatial, and the bathrooms are filled with polished gold accents and softer, thicker towels than I knew existed.

The receptionist needs even more of a deposit than the Royalton did, so after handing him my four thousand, still in its envelope, I call my bank and tell the woman who answers that I'm treating my aunt to a few days in New York City. Could I get my hands on another ten thousand dollars?

She checks my balance and tells me that she's happy to take the cap off my daily withdrawal limit.

“So then I can just use my debit card?” I ask.

“With that balance of yours, you should be more than all set, sir.”

Any door I want to open, opening. But what good is an open door? Growing up, I was often bullied, so I began to will myself from being passive to active, soft to hard. Yet none of that knowledge, none of that hard-earned change, would have come without resistance. These welcoming smiles, these soft comforts, feel like the beginning of atrophy, of danger.

The rest of our trip is a blur of excess. Checking into the Plaza, we had seen the horse carriages across the street, the drivers in top hats. So we take a ride through Central Park, my smiling aunt closing her eyes to the clomping of hooves, the thwack of tennis balls. There’s a limo ride to the Museum of Natural History, our kids marvelling at the *T. rex* skeleton. There’s dinner at another Michelin restaurant, the musician Meatloaf sitting right beside us. (After striking up a conversation with my aunt, who keeps calling him Mr. Meatball, he sends our table a bottle of Cristal.) There’s a ride to F.A.O. Schwarz, though Fontaine and I don’t even consider buying any of the expensive toys.

The truth is, I’m beginning to regret exposing our kids to a way of life that I do not even remotely respect. On our last morning at the Plaza, we eat at the brunch buffet. Set among tall potted palms and gold-leaved columns are four tiers of linen-draped tables, with silver platters of eggs and sausages, prime rib and cured salmon, baked scones and tarts. A mountain of fruit sits in a bowl larger than the font in which my children were baptized. Having worked in restaurants, I know that whatever is left of this will be thrown out. For three days, I have tasted luxury, and I’ve had enough.

At the airport, we all hug and kiss Aunt Jeannie. I make sure she has a helper to get her to her first-class flight back to Kentucky. Then we catch the

Amtrak home, my three kids falling asleep almost immediately, my sister and her daughter, too.

Beside me, Fontaine's reading a book, and across the aisle my mother sits at a table with her cup of coffee. She smiles brightly at me, and I smile back. I'm calculating that in three days I have spent what I once made in an entire year. Is that possible?

In one way, I feel fine about this. I was able to give my aunt a weekend she'll never forget. Throughout my childhood, there was the jagged feeling that I was waiting for something, or someone, to come take care of us. I had no idea that it would be me.

The boy in me can only feel dumbstruck at this, but the man is thinking of how hard I would have to work for all the money I just spent. How it would be months of getting up before dawn, of ten-hour days under a hot sun, taking Sawzalls to half-rotted clapboards, swinging sledgehammers into hundred-year-old studs, prying out windows and horsehair plaster along walls. There were the newspapers used as insulation, stuffed with ancient straw and mouse shit, making my brother and me cough. There was getting down on our knees on protruding nail heads. There was covering a roof with asphalt shingles, humping each heavy bundle up a ladder over one shoulder, our thighs burning, the air squeezed out of our lungs. There were taping and mudding and sanding. There was laying tiles on wet mortar we'd mixed from eighty-pound bags. There was hanging new cabinet boxes in the kitchen, and there was standing at the new island and discussing final paint colors with the owner. Man or woman, they tended to carry the no-nonsense air of one accustomed to big projects, and no matter how skilled I or my brother might be, no matter how much we might know about our work, these owners always talked to us in the same way: as though we were less than they were, and always would be, because we worked with our hands.

A week of that work might pay five or six hundred dollars before taxes. This weekend I tipped that amount a few times over, which felt partly like solidarity. All those hundreds went to waiters and busboys, drivers and porters, people who would always be seen as *less than*. Sitting on the train, I can still feel in my body the toll of such work. The wealth created by my novel, meanwhile, just doesn't feel real. I spent four years on the book, writing it longhand in my parked car, my agent sending it to nearly two dozen publishers over two years. During that time, I built things and taught classes. I started a new piece of writing, and began to expect that the novel would never be sold. So when that door did swing open, when I and my family were pulled into a land where no one spoke my mother tongue, why *wouldn't* I try to go back to where I used to be?

Still, Fontaine wants a home in which to raise our three children, a home that belongs to *us*. In the soft rocking of the train, I sense that my wife is learning to speak a new language, and that it's time for me to learn it, too. I tell myself that, when I get back, I will stop spending all this money. I'll acquire the permits we need to build the house. Yes, it will be the first house any of us have owned, but it *will* happen, though not for many months, months when I and my brother will haul lumber to be measured and cut, where we'll load our nail guns and strap on our tool belts. And something strange will happen to me. With each wall my brother and I raise, with each nail I drive, I'll begin to feel grounded again. I'll feel the presence of the boy inside me who wants a home.

My mother's smiling at me again, and I smile back.

Sometimes a car will roll slowly down our driveway, and for a dizzying heartbeat I'm convinced it's the landlord coming for the rent we don't have. But other moments feel like luxury, filling me with a calming gratitude. When I want to visit my mother, I just walk down the stairs to her apartment stuffed with her plants and her books, her photos of us when we were young and often so unhappy. Before sitting on her sofa, a real one, I pour her a bourbon, and I pour myself one, too, and my mother and I sit and catch up on the labors of our respective days, on

my brother and sisters, on my kids and her grandchildren, on all these people we love, high times or not, a smile on her lovely, aging face. ♦

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Andre Dubus III is the author of books including "House of Sand and Fog," "Townie: A Memoir," and "Such Kindness."

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By Allegra Goodman



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Julia had longed to be an educated mother like Vroni, but there was never a serviceable father in view, so she had limited herself to being educated.

By Nell Zink



### BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.

#### Why Millennials Love Prenups

Long the province of the ultra-wealthy, prenuptial agreements are being embraced by young people—including many who don’t have all that much to divvy up.

By Jennifer Wilson



### NOVELLAS

#### “The Ice-Skater”

The man from Kabul had warned about the number of men assigned to each room. “I won’t lie to you,” he had said. “You’ll be uncomfortable. You’ll have to adjust.”



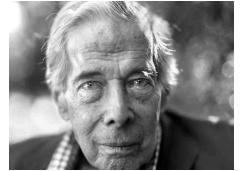
**By Kanak Kapur**

**JOURNALS**

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Like The New Yorker, I was born in 1925. Somewhat to my surprise, I decided to keep a journal of my hundredth year.

**By Calvin Tomkins**



**FICTION**

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Despite our best efforts, we were going to be, in the end, two more thirtysomethings from Brooklyn getting married in the Hudson Valley.

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**HUMOR**

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Given the wild fluctuations in the market, I did what anyone with a crippling dependence on pencils would do: I took inventory.

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**By Molly Fischer**



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