



ESSAY

The Great Migration

by Deenie Mislock-Hartzog

Mississippi ➔ Brooklyn

“I can handle it,” I reassured myself, repeating the mantra in my head.

This place hasn’t been cleaned in decades. Often I’ll climb a set of stairs or turn a sharp corner and a puddle of vomit will greet me—remnants of the night’s escapades gone awry. Once I stumbled upon someone defecating on a wall. I walked the other way. I’ve passed a man masturbating at the entryway (the entry!), and I’ve recoiled as police carried a dead body from the underground. Oh, and the rats. There are always rats.

This is not a post-apocalyptic world I am navigating. I’m not in need of medical attention, but I am in a dire situation. I’m commuting in Manhattan. I, along with the rest of city, tolerate this process daily. And while these experiences, believe it or not, eventually lose their shock value, they never cease to momentarily defeat me.

To be fair, it’s not all subway horror stories. I’ve had more poignant moments in my decade in New York City than a library could hold: weathering literal and figurative storms in the apartment I’ve come to love with the man I met and married here; everyday moments so beautiful, even tears wouldn’t do them justice; faith tested, loves lost, hopes crushed. I was kicked and I kicked back. I’m in debt to this place for both sweeping me off my feet and knocking the wind from my gut. I’m also in financial debt.

“I can handle it,” just doesn’t cut it anymore.

In Joan Didion’s iconic “Goodbye To All That,” she notes that she can specifically pinpoint the beginning of her adventure in New York City, but that she can’t quite put her finger on when it was over for her. Many, like me, have doubts about when their quality time in New York comes to a close. I only know it by the same marker in which Didion recognized her demise: the feeling that I’ve stayed too long at the fair.



Deenie at Kellogg’s Diner in Williamsburg

Call it growing up. Or exhaustion. We can’t survive on our 20-something diets made of hazy New York nights and corner pizza forever. Though I’ve tried. At one time I was an indefatigable force on city streets—outdrink them, outlove them, outfun them. Now, what enchanted me about New York City has gone and died like the tail end of a fizzling firework.

Unlike Didion’s essay, however, I am not yet gone. Instead, I am living in a kind of urban purgatory, desperate to move on but terrified of going.

Leaving New York comes with a price, an unmatchable set of standards no city could live up to. Ever noticed how people don’t pen love letters and eulogies to any other American city the way they do New York? Even [the letters](#) that do exist no doubt lack the emotional verve and agony painfully apparent in their [New York counterparts](#).

Why? Because New York City is not a place, it’s an idea woven into the minds of millions through film, literature, music, and media influence, with a history larger than the lifetime of some states. The physical city is simply a prop, a set design to accommodate our rampant imaginations.

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Even the way we talk about New York City is a veritable game of Telephone, passing our tales to one another until their origins are as thin as the exhaust from a taxicab careening down the FDR. We’ll believe almost anything about New York, and why shouldn’t we? Anything is possible here and that’s why we love it.

When I left Mississippi for Manhattan, I worked hard to fit in. I was insecure that my bottle-

blonde hair, butter-soft drawl, and ear-to-ear grin would attract the wrong kind of attention. And it did. I was met with condescension, the verbal equivalent of petting a puppy. I’d left the South to chase opportunities that didn’t exist there. I wanted access, liberation, and experience. I sought a life that could thrive only outside the lower Red States. And eventually I got it.

New York City allowed me to reinvent myself—repeatedly—with little to no consequence. However one thread remained constant: Me in the role of the likable southern girl on the East Coast, an outsider weaseling her way into northern territory, a liaison between north and south, liberals and conservatives, new-age millennials and old-school mothers. And yet, I was naïve enough to think that one day I’d go home again.

Somewhere between riding a U-Haul into Midtown in 2005 and writing this essay from my apartment in Brooklyn, my plan to live in New York only a few years backfired. I waited too long, and when I wasn’t looking, most likely complaining about winter, this place commandeered my identity. The city inflated my ego and expectations to such a nauseating degree, that it feels implausible, impossible even, to live elsewhere. So I’m left begging the question, “Who will I be if I’m not a New Yorker?”

Funny enough, it was also Didion who wrote, “I’ve already lost touch with a couple of people I used to be.”



Caption

Now, in my early 30s, it’s time for a change: more space, a car, a kid...a dishwasher. On a search for the next best thing, my husband and I packed our west-coast best and flew to Los Angeles. But the cost of living, the traffic, and the distance from family aren’t much better than the obstacles we are trying to escape in Brooklyn.

So we went to explore a city more like the one of my youth, like a place I once called home. We pushed aside our palm-tree shrouded dreams and set out for the boot-stomping streets of Nashville. Diligently we explored every recommendation, from bars in East Nashville to the coffee shops and restaurants on “best of” lists. It was lovely. And terrifying.

While L.A. felt like slowing down, Nashville felt like stopping. My mind raced to worst-case scenarios: a future of suburban doldrums, me longing for the fast-paced, high-intensity life I left behind, tortured by a stream of former friends’ Instagram posts—Brooklyn sunsets, Manhattan skylines, and snippets of big-city life I might have captured through my own lens. I felt small.

The most difficult realization came in a form I hadn’t expected. There is no novelty in the South. It just feels like home, one I left because I was bored.

It’s not that I don’t love it. I still I prefer the thick, balmy summers and eye-squinting sunshine of my youth to any New England winter. I long for our annual Gulf Coast vacations, where we lounge on white-sand beaches and drink Bushwackers at the [Flora-Bama](#). I marvel at the regal Magnolia trees, I relish in the symphony of crickets in summer, and I admit that the South is overflowing with enough charm to wipe the pants right off your person. But after a lifetime of witness, these commonplaces have worn on me the way leather wears on the family sofa. It’s comfortable. Too comfortable.

Is it that I’m addicted to bright, new, shiny toys? That I’m too taken back by the magnitude of differences between north and south? Or simply by the vast gap that exists between New York City and the rest of the world? Why can’t I be happy in a city that once quickened my pulse? And why can’t I imagine myself in the most comfortable “home” I’ve ever known?

The Nashville trip marked a sobering moment for us. We’re far too accustomed to careening through every moment at a full-blown sprint. We’re spoiled socially; our friends here are apostles of progress—gender liberal, open minded, agnostic, holistic types. We’re too cozy standing at the top of our self-righteous pillars of the up-and-coming, cutting-edge, saw-it-here firsts.

We have been ruined by a city that we cannot stand to coexist with any longer. But we don’t know how to leave because we cannot find the exit.

I don’t regret much in my life, but lately, the possibility of remorse looms large. I fear losing time with my family down south and I can’t let go of the pestering thought that maybe—just maybe—I might actually be happier outside of this city.

To leave a place you call home on your own volition, your reason for leaving must outweigh your desire to stay. And by New York City standards, our reasons are never good enough. Nothing is ever good enough in this town. That’s one reason I love it; there’s no room for complacency here.

Today I have more fears to overcome than I did in 2005, when my brother drove away and left me at my first apartment in Manhattan. But I cling to one reminder: Though New York City thickened my skin, it was the South that taught me about grit. If I am anything, I am a product of the places I’ve lived. I am resilient and determined, and I can’t think of anything more southern—or more New York City—than that. ■

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