FLASH NONFICTION

Dispatches from New York City: the ferry ride

by Leyla Shukurli



Untitled by Suresh Babu

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It is my first summer in New York.

Not an actual summer that belongs to me fully, but a two-week long vacation that I took to come here all the way from Germany. The year is 2018, my life is still largely centered in the heart of Europe, in that beautiful but somewhat emotionally distant country. So, for me, the trip to New York is not only a welcome respite from work but also a chance to see whether I like this city in the summer, and whether or not I want to move here one day. The question is not an easy one — it so happens that I am one of those peculiar, northern-born humans who hates the heat and everything else people usually love about this season. Sand. Tanning. Slow motion of days. Still, if I can truly love a city in the summer, I can love it wholeheartedly, from now to the end of time.

It helps that some of my closest friends already live here. Among them, Tanya, a Belarusian writer who has been residing in New York for four years. By the time we meet she has developed a deep connection to this place and become very good at showing it off, as one would show off a dear, talented, truly exceptional friend. “Leyla, meet the Elisabeth Street Garden, a truly magical place which has been fighting with the city authorities for its very right to exist. Here, just two minutes away is the Albanese Meat and Poultry Shop owned by Moe the Butcher, a legendary guy who has been here forever. Do you see him in there now, in that blood-red wooden window, holding a fresh fatty leg of lamb that is surely very, very fresh but seems to have been here forever, too?... Careful, my friend, your back is now facing a Very Fancy Cosmetics shop, the most treacherous place in all of Soho. It lures in naïve passers-by with promises of exceptional beauty and eternal youth, only to end up charging them 300 dollars for a free in-house product testing session. Are you very, very scared yet? I would be if I was you.

“And then there is this other place, called Red Hook. It used to be all dangerous, industrial and bloody, but has turned into an art space for musicians, writers, artists and other weird folk like you and me. Everyone who comes to New York and, for some reason, feels sorrow, must go to Red Hook to see the red sun setting down over Manhattan. The best way to get there? It is to cross the ocean on a ferry, so that by the time you arrive at the peninsula, you have already left all the sorrows behind. Are you ready, friend? Are you absolutely, totally ready?”

By accident, she is right — not only am I trying to decide whether the New York summer is too much for me, I am also going through an emotional turmoil in my love life, which is why I am occasionally sad, deeply unhappy. So, one early evening, close to the end of my vacation, we take the ferry from the Wall Street Pier and head to Red Hook. The weather is warm but the moment the ferry starts moving, the wind comes. Stupidly, I haven’t prepared

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for it well enough, so the next minutes are spent on a wild struggle with my hair. It is everywhere — my eyes, my nose, my ears, seemingly even in my lungs. Finally, I manage to tame it with a braid; when I am half through, Tanya points a finger to the large container cranes that seem to rise up right from the middle of the ocean and asks:

“Do they look like gigantic giraffes to you? Or large chairs?”

“Definitely giraffes.”

“Ha!” Tanya smiles. “There are only two types of people in New York: those who see the Giraffes and those who see the Chairs. We are both in the Giraffes’ team.”

She concludes slightly condescendingly:

“But the Chair people are also human.”

The wind is blowing hard, it is impossible to talk anymore. I keep thinking that I have never seen such wild colors before — where I come from, the Old World, sunsets are gorgeous too, but never so unrealistically intense. Slowly, I start to understand that the joke about a ferry ride that helps to cure heartache is only half a joke. After all, how can anyone feel sad for too long when the world around them looks so achingly beautiful?...

“It is the most heartbreaking city in the world, isn’t it?” I ask Tanya when we finally dock. A question out of the blue.

“Oh yes,” she says nonchalantly without so much as raising an eyebrow. “Oh yes, it is.”

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