

Madam Manhattan: a Memoir

by
Victor E. Smith

Picture a seven-year-old country lad who falls in love with a wealthy, voluptuous, urbane, older woman who then dallies with his immoderate affection over the next six decades to no apparent purpose. Such was my relationship with that sliver of an island known as Manhattan, New York City's most famous borough.

Born and suckled on a Pennsylvania farm perched in the hills above the Delaware River, I aspired only to the heroics of my fellow rube, Tom Sawyer, until that pivotal week when my father took me along on one of his rare trips to New York City. This farm, mind, was not just in the sticks; it was an intentional anachronism: the '50s, but without electricity, running water, or indoor plumbing. Just packing a suitcase, riding in a car, and taking the four-lane highway over the bridge to another state was momentous. Already agog with the novelties crowding the



The farm where I grew up in Pennsylvania

70-mile stretch across New Jersey, I might have levitated a foot on first sighting the city's jagged skyline, which popped up, a massive dreamscape, as we topped the Palisades.

I settled back, glad for the breath, when we plunged into the Lincoln Tunnel—a mile and a half long, my father informed me. That contained space, with its continual whooshing and beeping, was the requisite ritual of death and burial, I think now, before my explosive resurrection into the pounding heart of mid-Manhattan. One would think a wee country lad, who walked six miles roundtrip to school, had never entered a movie theater, and rarely encountered a stranger, would have been shattered by the sudden cacophony. It was a riotous blur, for sure, a relentless assault on tender senses, a shocking thrust into turbulent waters, which left me flailing for air. Awe and confusion in spades, but something more, something new, something stimulating, exhilarating.

Before that, even the most anticipated events fell short of expectation. Like Peggy Lee, I was always singing, "Is that all there is to a fire?" But here, I knew right away, I was not to be disappointed. Madam Manhattan would always be more than enough. This was no crush like I had on a cute little second-grader back home. This was true love, and with a grand and powerful woman, a veritable empress, who demanded and deserved complete attention, fealty, and adoration even.

Specific memories of our first encounter are scarce; things rarely stood still long enough for me to absorb a clear image. Those I did retain are, oddly, not what is pictured on postcards: staying in an upper-floor tenement apartment with light switches, a telephone always ringing, and cockroaches scurrying everywhere; waking in the dark to the roar of the passing El train, which rattled the windows so hard that I ducked for cover in case the glass shattered; being entranced by the lights at night, millions of them, moving and still, but below, not above like the stars in the country sky.

The trip was over too soon, of course. The first evening back on the farm I stood by a second-story window looking east toward Manhattan. I was crying. I had been bitten, smitten, infatuated, intoxicated; I would never be happy until I went back to her.



On the Staten Island Ferry 1975

It was a dozen years of adolescent ennui in exile before the opportunity presented itself. I was now twenty and penniless. It was the late '60's; hippies, protesters, panhandlers, and pickpockets now inhabited large swaths of the island. The rules of propriety I had been taught thus far had no relevance here; the city followed no code but its own. At first, I watched from the sidelines as protesters shouted down the status quo: *Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?* Later, I joined in the yelling, not from conviction—heck, I'd come here to experience and enjoy the status quo—but to be doing what everyone else was doing, perhaps for the first time in my life.

I was supposed to report to Fordham University to finish college. The campus was in the Bronx, Manhattan's shabby stepsister; I rented a cheap room in a boarding house there, taking some comfort in knowing that my sweetheart lay waiting just across the Harlem River. I eventually scored a part-time job within her actual confines as a retail clerk for Gimbels on Broadway and Herald Square. To those more ensconced in the city's extravaganza I probably seemed the lowly extra; but, I congratulated myself, I had made it to the big show.

For the next two years, I rushed from role to role, no rehearsal, no time to take the rare applause. A bit too often I got to play the Scrounge. In one take, I ventured into a pawn shop and handed over my watch for five bucks, food money for the week. In another, I fell to my knees gushing with gratitude when a one-dollar bill miraculously appeared in the gutter, much needed subway fare. I also did Mr. Fastidious, gagging dramatically over the heap of cockroach corpses left by the exterminator on the floor of our East Village flat.

But not everything on my accumulating resume was low-brow. I snagged some reputable parts as well, admittedly more luck than talent. A Warner Brothers film crew fixed on our humble six-floor walkup on east 64th Street as suitable for the roof scenes in

The Angel Levine, the movie starring Zero Mostel and Harry Belafonte. They chose our top-floor apartment for a staging and rest area. So for a week I hobnobbed with Hollywood stars, partook of the banquets they had brought in, was paid generously, and got handed breaks into the bizz that others more worthy took years to garner. Shortly thereafter, I was cast, albeit as an extra, in the movie version of *The Boys in the Band*, a “challenging” bit in which I had to sit in a Greenwich Village bar with bell bottoms on and drink beer at 6 o’clock in the morning.

Nor were all my roles were cameo and trivial. Madam Manhattan, for all her paint and powder, was a deliberate director who placed me in parts, not always with consent, that might catalyze the unfolding of my personal character and life story. One such sequence opens on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. An attractive



Metropolitan Museum of Art 9-23-12

woman places a gilded invitation to a local lecture into my hand, promising with eyes for me only that I will see more of her if I attend. I go and am so bedazzled by the whole bevy of beauties lavishing me with attention that I overlook the obvious signs that I am being lured into a cult that wants not only my money and my time but my mind and my



The Plaza Hotel on 59th and 5th, 10-4-09

life. High on promises that this is a place where I can learn a lucrative counseling career, help save the planet, and finally lose my virginity, not necessarily in that order, I am soon putting in sixteen-hour days six days a week and taking out peanuts for pay. Broke again, hungry, and tired, I am about to make for the exit when, lo, not the least of their promises is fulfilled: I get laid, and a bit later acquire a wife, a Venus on the Half-Shell lookalike—no complaints there—five years older and infinitely more experienced than me but, alas, a committed cultie.

There’s much to this story that won’t fit into a short memoir—we’re talking about Madam Manhattan, the epitome of extravagance, here. So, cut to the chase. Veteran city dwellers know that it is not a fine line between those who have and those who have not. With money, New York can be heaven; without it, it’s surely hell. For us

marriage blossomed into pregnancy with the additional financial burden; and my agent convinced me, still the wannabe actor, that the gelt was greener in Hollywood TV studios than on Broadway stages. So, Madam be damned, we readied to head out. Persuaded by the fact that the cult's center for higher initiation was in Los Angeles, my wife sold her last diamond to fund the venture. I learned to drive, bought an old Country Squire station wagon, and piled our belongings onto the roof rack and into the inside space remaining around the palatial cage in which her reclusive Siamese cat would travel.



Poster, 8-16-09

the blond beauty of storied California.

But the woman scorned, whose fury I thought had outraced, still had bullets left. No sooner had we arrived in Los Angeles than a cop spotted our frumpy wagon with temporary NY plates, pulled us over, and, gun drawn, ordered me out of the car and frisked me. I'd gone through a yellow light, he said. When I replied that in New York yellow meant to step on it or get rear-ended, he gave me an evil grin and wrote out a big ticket with nary a word of welcome.

Despite the constant snickering about her older sister aptly called the Empire State, California is often just a mirror reflecting what happens first back east. Hollywood makes the movies, but the stories take place in New York. Disney builds amusement parks, but the money comes from and goes back to Wall Street. Even the LA

But Madam was not about to let me go free without a fight. While I was loading the car, my prized possessions, a guitar and typewriter, were vacuumed up by a phantom thief. A package toppled from the roof rack and was crushed in traffic shortly after the Lincoln Tunnel. We got lost for hours looking for my sister's house, not ten miles from the city. Nevertheless, I hunkered behind the wheel and piloted that Conestoga due west, across the Mississippi, over the Continental Divide, hell-bent for



Reflections, 58th St., 10-4-09

Dodgers learned baseball in Brooklyn. The skirts of the empress form a big tent indeed. To be someone elsewhere in the world, it is not enough to be *from* Manhattan. Like a devout Muslim taking that mandatory trek to Mecca, one must, to remain in the Madam's good graces, make regular pilgrimages back *to* New York. That it took me so long to comprehend this law does not reduce its potency; it merely proves, as pointed out by another lady friend—a native New Yorker, of course—that I can be a “pig-headed turkey.”



The fountain in Central Park, 10-4-09

My twenties were spent in the mode of a convict who has mastered the art of escape but can't avoid recapture. No sooner did my skin regain a healthy glow in the wide-open west than Madam would conjure me back, like a yoyo on a string, to her sunless streets and airless skyscrapers. Why I returned and why I ran off again makes little difference. She had me strapped to her dizzying merry-go-round and, laughing, dared me to jump off.

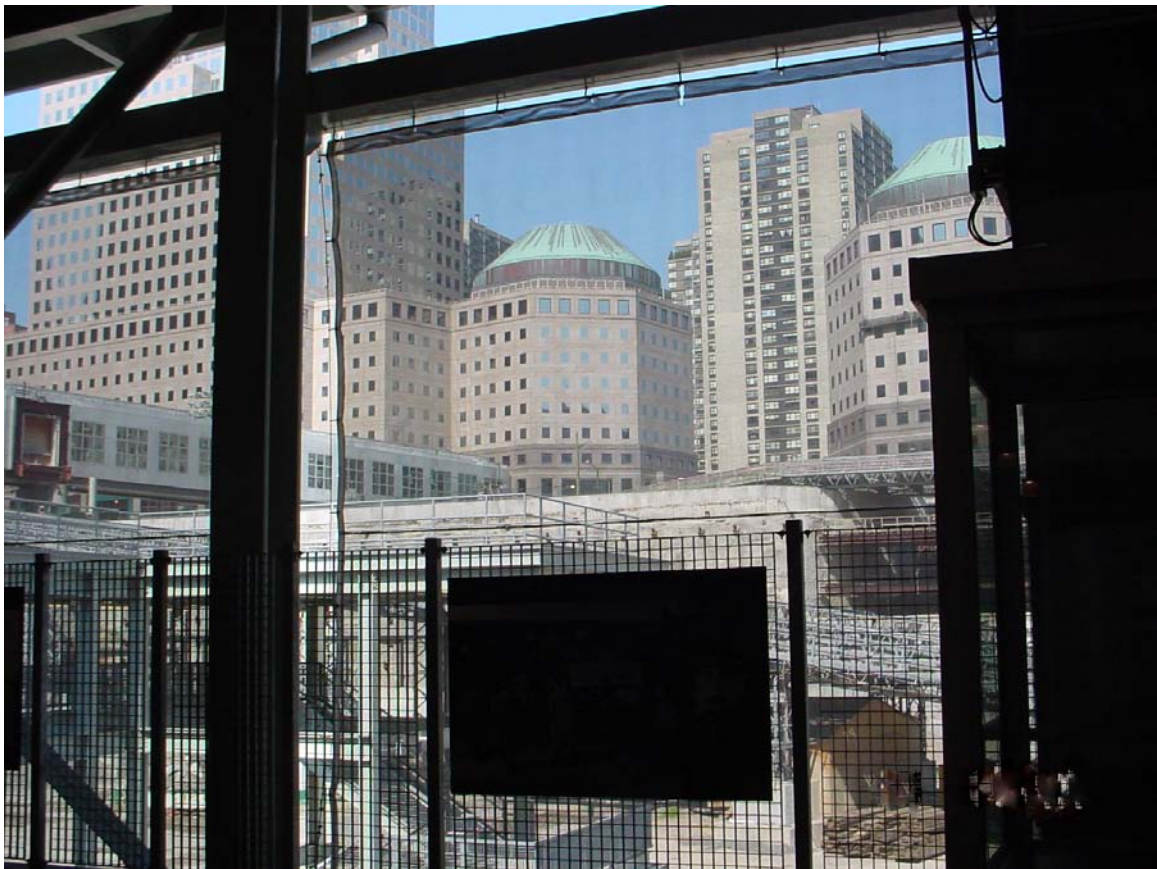
In the eighties, I thought I found a permanent refuge in idyllic Boulder, Colorado, a worthy new lover I interpreted as evidence that the spell was broken. Madam let me entertain that illusion for fifteen years before she again pulled me back east. This time though, as if to punish my extended truancy, I was sentenced to reside in New Jersey and allowed on the island only during work hours. I became a commuter, schlepping daily by train from that halfway house west of the Hudson to a squat cubicle in the otherwise posh World Financial Center next door to the then still-standing Twin Towers. Older now and duly chastened, I performed my role as a member of a team installing a complicated new computer program for a major media company. In June 2001 the project was successfully completed, and the crew was feted in the Windows on the World restaurant atop the World Trade



Central Park in Autumn 11-5-09

Center's North Tower. An honorable discharge finally in hand, I again packed up the family, now in a late-model minivan, and headed for Tucson, Arizona, where I planned to settle at poolside and develop a long-mothballed idea for a novel. This time there were no ghosts in the rear view mirror—none that I could see.

“Dad, you should turn on the TV. A plane just crashed into World Trade Center near your old work,” my daughter's frightened voice broke into my meditation on the morning of September 11, shortly after we settled in Tucson. Like the rest of the world I spent that day watching the tragedy unfold, painfully mindful, however, that three months earlier I was walking up from the Path Station, through the WTC, and across the West Street footbridge at precisely the time that the first plane hit. Friends I had left behind would have been sitting against those windows now facing an inferno. As her Twin Towers toppled, I was again that smitten seven-year-old weeping for his lady. Incredibly, Madam Manhattan was down.



In the footsteps of the WTC towers. I worked in the center building with the rounded dome. 6-21-05

This time when the call to return came, I was ready and willing. The catastrophe had impacted my former company, and all hands were needed to set up a temporary base for publishing operations. Huddled with about six others in the front of the otherwise empty aircraft, I was on one of the first planes allowed into Newark Airport after the disaster, the sickening smoke billowing up from Ground Zero on our left as we landed. Unlike first responders, medical personnel, and salvage workers, I had no critical skill. Madam Manhattan just wanted me there, I came to believe, to sit by her bedside, hold her

hand, and be a friend. An unaccustomed role into which I gracefully surrendered. A high honor that I gratefully accepted.



The new World Trade Center Tower 1 under construction 10-4-09

Madam Manhattan, as we know, proved resilient, her recovery long but inevitable. That tragic day may have tempered her brassiness, focused her profligacy, softened her dominance, and rendered her sensuality more tender, but again and always she was the empress. Over the next ten years I spent much of my time living, working, and playing on that narrow island between the Hudson and East Rivers.

It was not my destiny to remain with her, to die in her enfolding arms. Recently I was to return to the open space, big sky, and deep silence of the western mountains and deserts, a habitat more suited to a country lad. This time I drove away slowly, my eyes lingering on the recovered skyline receding in the rearview mirror. A tear rolling down my cheek, I threw my lady a kiss. Madam Manhattan smiled in response. Both of us

wiser now, we knew it was not goodbye. *Au revoir*, we said in sync. *Until we meet again, my friend.*

