

Coming to America

by [David Portyanskiy](#) (October 2022)



Marooned, Howard Pyle, 1909

Contextual analysis is in order. For these pages start in medias res, the purpose doesn't. I haven't lived here for many years and my upbringing back home varies wildly. The landscape of the countryside at Polevsky was the place of my birth. It is a town in the Sverdlovsk oblast. When I was four years old, my family and I moved to Yekaterinburg, where I have lived for most of my life, until I decided to move to America. When I decided to move, I knew that it was something that I had to do. Life back home wasn't possible for, let's say, ambitious people. There was too much bureaucracy and nothing moved as smoothly as I have read about in this country. Some of my family members—my uncle and my grandfather's best friend's

son—moved to America, and made something for themselves. They visited home and sent money, but the stories they told me fueled my drive to risk it all and fly over. I have lived here for almost three years and the many impressions I have collected have given me confidence to record them.

All recollections are taken from my first few months living in Manhattan.

Her name was Lola. I met her at my literature class. She was tall with a thin frame and cascading blonde hair, with a touch of natural brown towards the center. The first assignment the professor instructed was for the class to join into groups of two and write a collaborative essay on an assigned short story. A review of sorts.

I have completed one semester of university, this being my second. I enrolled realizing that employment in this country heavily relies on a degree, regardless on the quality of the job.

Lola and I were sitting next to each other and we ended up becoming partners. She kept a cold exterior until we started talking. We discovered we both shared a common ground. We both moved to this city from different parts of the world. I asked her and found that she is originally from a small town in California. She told me about her prior life back home, in a slightly ostentatious manner. I told her about myself and, when class was over, we continued talking until we reached outside and for a few blocks afterwards. As soon as class ended, our flow of dialogue became more fluid and less broken, as the professor wasn't there to instruct the class. She walked quickly or maybe all New Yorkers walked this quickly. I tried to keep up but kept my normal pace. In the city, even the way people walk is an indication of their upbringing and class.

We parted at the corner but before we went our separate ways, we exchanged phone numbers. Later that night, we would discuss the project that was assigned to us.

The weather was tepid, as the last of the summer heat abated. The wind picked up, forcing me to wear a light jacket. I strolled the upper streets of Times Square looking for employment. My last job suffered from downsizing and my role was eliminated. The university provided for all my educational expenses, so my enrollment was not affected. Yet I needed to work to support my living expenses, and needed to quickly end my predicament of unemployment. Yet, here, all I saw, were help wanted signs at eateries, and the concept of a waiter or a dishwasher was not very appetizing.

It was three in the afternoon and the majority of the establishments were still closed. I left Times Square, which was amassed with stylistic filth and tourists, and continued eastward. There, the visible affluence and luxury exhibited the neighborhood's predilection. The streets appeared to be painted in gold. But as gold shines and costs dearly, the old superstition rings in my ears, from back home: *Gold is a drainer of energy and its mutations allows anybody to own it without knowing who its previous owners were.* I continued my job search and I found a few establishments that were open. In one, the smell of cooked steak in seasoning permeated around the entrances. I was distracted for a moment but went inside, asking if employment was available. As with the others, the same phrase was replied back. Some of them informed me that they hired workers through an agency and to apply to them.

I went up 5th Avenue and saw a book store to my right. The window displayed two books, both of pointless worth but with high public relations. Best way to make a book seem prestigious is good advertisement. I entered and perused the stock. I found something in the social science section, which

was surprising considering the majority of books in this section are seemed to exist to cause strife between the races. I have quickly become disillusioned to American publishing as the majority care more about the superficial qualities of the author than they do about the actual quality of the written work. I picked up a book and read the title. I bought it after reading the dust jacket, then placed it in my backpack and left the store.

I continued along 5th Avenue. The clothing stores glittered. High fashion dominated or even reached its precipice in these few blocks on this side of the eastern hemisphere. One or two, to my amazement, had a café attached in the Parisian style. Money in exchange for luxury. High capital culture. It was especially here where the rich sell their wares to the public and convert their high-end costs into high-end profits. I can never get over the feeling that these few blocks are nothing but an interactive museum. A museum where one can purchase their products but will never live in the society that these items are made for. It appears to be nothing but a simulation, nothing but a fountain pouring out while the goal is to enter and the fountain pour in.

Down further stood a church, the architecture gothic. Despite it being built, possibly over one or two centuries ago, the place where it stands—in the hub of commerce—makes it seem ironic. The church takes up an entire side of a city block, while across the street stands a lingerie store. One block further north stands an Omega shop. Religion surrounded by conspicuous consumption. This only solidifies the impressions of the museum. The Plaza hotel ended on 5th and Central Park began.

Biking through the park was one of those small instances of peace in an otherwise rapid lifestyle. That day, I didn't last

long due to my tired legs, after walking for two hours. Near the Plaza stood rental bikes operated through CitiBank. With your phone you can access them for a few dollars for half an hour, or more.

I finished on the west side of 72nd Street. I locked the bike in the stand and completed the transaction. My phone buzzed the receipt and I moved on.

I was exhausted but what was there to do at home? Nothing. With that, I had no reason to return yet. With time to spare and places to see, I decided to continue down 72nd to 52nd to find a place to have dinner. I recalled the restaurant I ate the first night I arrived and saw its neighbor sitting across the street on the same block. Both of them served the same specialty food from my home country. I would go there later but for now I will enjoy the buildings and the streets, the people, and the cars.

The Park bench gave me the opportunity to rest my feet. After walking, I needed this. I opened my book and began reading. The outside noises passed by and all the different sounds became easy to tune out. They merged into an incoherent buzz of urban sprawl.

Twenty minutes later I stood up and walked down the path to the Vodka Room. When I arrived, I ordered lamb with a glass of wine and listened to the Brazilian arrangements of popular songs from the pianist and the singer. I liked the music but every piece blurred into each other, leaving none to stick into my mind. Nice soothing music, but nothing more.

As I ate, I started to reflect. How can one describe things when one doesn't even have anyone to describe them to? I transcribe these events in a telegraphic style for I feel life has thrown me into their context. Words cut dried in their

sparse prose. The joy is hard to find in their meaning. Robbed of life. Why? Thinking of what I left behind—my family, my friends. Even if we didn't always have much of a connection, there was connection. Walking down 8th Avenue to eat alone in a small bar restaurant, hearing the music of a pianist, while knowing I will return home to an empty apartment describes the lifestyle of around half of the urban population. Money can't cure all of societal ills because as soon as an ill is cured, another will arise. Once you solved a problem, another will be created, intentionally or accidentally.

I talked to Lola the following day and she mentioned about a job in a book store she works at. She described the staff as personable but pretentious. The work, at least, is easy, she said. Mentioning how the owner and manager are allowing her to take a day off to celebrate her birthday, I thought that the employment was very lax. Lola continued to tell me that her mother is coming to town to see her. I was surprised at the minimal hours she needed to work, since back home, the only way I could've received a day off was either for medical reasons or *force majeure*, never a birthday or something similar to that.

"Are they hiring?" I asked.

"Actually, they are. They need help since the last person moved to Florida."

"Do you think you can help me out? I really need a job. I've applied to so many places and none of them responded."

"I'll ask. Just come in and hand in your resume."

"Thank you."

She was indifferent to me asking about an availability of the job or that I would possibly be working with her. Despite

that, I landed the job, with her help. Currently she works there Wednesdays and Fridays. The manager scheduled me for Tuesdays and Thursdays. The tasks required of me were not difficult. It merely consisted of shelving books, operating the cash register, and sweeping the floors. It was a decent size store, about the dimensions of fifteen car lengths. Books filled each wall and, in the center, stood a few rows of vinyl records. The prices were affordable compared to the other locations scattered throughout the city. The best thing about this location was its close proximity to my apartment.

It was at Union Square where I saw my first protest movement. With time to spare before class, I was eating my lunch, sitting on the steps that formed the edge of the park. There were benches as you entered the divided paths but near them stood garbage cans overflowing with filth and rats scattering around. Couples and friends sat down, talking, and there was always a homeless person or two sleeping or sitting with their shopping carts filled with plastic bags. The faces of the sleeping ones were hidden but their aroma was pungent and strong. The sitting ones had distinguished scowls and missing teeth or light scars, either from years of drug use or societal neglect— and the result of all the used needles nearby along with the scent of marijuana.

Granted, I never saw a homeless people smoke, except for hoodlums in their early twenties or late teens. You can tell with their pants low enough to expose their underwear and their blatant extravagance of wasting money on flashy clothing and legalized drugs.

The smell around the city surprisingly isn't tainted since the passing of the legalization bill, but some neighborhoods have taken it as their newest cologne.

I always listened to music, walking the crowded streets of

Manhattan, due to the noise pollution. The traffic on 14th Street disappeared as hundreds of people rode their bicycles through from the right to the left. The police stood there, observing the ordeal, afraid of acting and later being labeled as a racist or a bigot. The bicyclists shouted from their megaphones and blurred out speech that resulted in nothing but incomprehensible cries, the words completely incoherent. The flags they carried were for an unspecific cause, something with immigrants, presumably. They drove down, flamboyant and belligerent, but rapid.

I ignored all of the beggars and peddlers surrounding the right side of the southern corner. The people there were always attempting to entice passersby into a game of chess for money or to distract attention with eastern meditation as they fleeced their wallets.

Passing towards 5th Avenue and reaching a relatively quiet street, I strolled along the rows until it was time to return to class.

The sun was bright and warm—the last remaining fall days while the wind was mild. The congestion of the city increased as the temperature slightly moved higher. The shade was scarce this time of day. Soon, as the sun tilted downwards towards evening, the buildings would block the light and cool the pavements.

If the validity of the current claim holds true, and now I'm holding reservations on its premise entirely, then right now we are living in an age of utter loneliness and isolation. Half of the urban population, in this city particular, has experienced feelings of separateness and longing for companionship.[\[*\]](#) Around sixty percent of the population in vast metropolitan cities in Asia and Japan have experienced similar traits. In Paris, half of the population, as well as

in Berlin, included. In every single industrial and post-Fordist region, where rents are high and housing is scarce, options for home ownership are minuscule, and this results in a constant rotation of neighbors. The prevailing structural hold in humanity is this present age forces us to hold a lacking in understanding or acquaintance with our neighbors, because they will most likely move every year or two. There is an abundance of souls walking the streets, yet we don't glance at them.. The trait of loneliness runs rampant in the city and that has become a structural sample of the culture itself. Rudeness dominates and civility, as well as chivalry, is almost nonexistent. A man lying on the street will continue to lie there even if he is dressed in a suit.

Capitalism is treated as a moral sin despite all of the benefits it has produced. People congregate in resentment towards one another and then use the very products they despise based on their blind logic and ignorance.

With the inherent trait of urban life comes the changing prevalence of social bonds. Divorce rates hit an all-time low because marriage has hit an all-time low. To have a father is not necessary if you are a single mother; the state will subsidize him. In fact, they give you money if he is not even present, yet the public calls him out as a despicable individual. If he stays, then no money will be given, except bills. Other modes of innovation from other countries take place over the internet. Friendships can be rented as well as sex. No longer does one see street-walkers. The prosecutions of these services are no longer routinely occurring. Prostitution is still illegal, but no police are focused on this, straight from the directives of city hall.

From sex to relationships of platonic nature, as well as the family unit—all of this is abating in importance as the government and capitalist enterprises enter. You take away a man's sense of use and the market will offer him a simulation of a use at a certain price. You take away a woman's need for

a father or husband and the government will step in with a printed representation and a voucher saying all is permissible.

I can continue but all of this is public knowledge espoused through acclaimed scholars and very select numbers of politicians. What baffles me is the consistent preaching from the young and some from the old who continue to want to dismantle the systems that have made them reach their current stages. They are responsible for their own suffering. What was once a necessity for human existence, the bonds that holds one another, is now going for a price and is in limited supply. Death is becoming a fashionable alternative. Suicide is become a legitimate source of protest, as well as price.

I'm writing this all down in my apartment while I wait either for the rain to stop or for the day to end. This only brought me into a darker mood. Work and school could only take away so much of my time, with the rest being spent wasting on walks, cafés, and meaningless searches for companionship. I talked to the bookstore's manager about giving me additional shifts at work. At first, he was reluctant to do so but, within a week's time, he agreed. He told me that Lola was considering reducing her hours so he would be able to increase mine. I was surprised since she barely worked at all. Later I talked to her about it.

"It's just, with school and everything, I need some more time away from work."

Her vagueness always stopped me from continuing my questions. She never exposed anything that can lead to compromise. No matter, since her scheduled hours were now mine.

I have grown to hate the weekend. I have grown to desire to work more and make more money. Yet this wasn't the end. In a few days, I was scrolling on my social media account and found

Lola by accident, on my recommended feed to follow.

I clicked her account and saw her photos, nothing out of the ordinary, except a dual account which was set to private. The small available message on the top of the profile did allow me to enter through a link. My pulse raced a bit as my suspicions proved to be accurate. Entering the link was a directed page towards a website which also contained a few separate links. On the website was her in scanty clothing. There were four links and the last one validated my suspicions. It was for an adult subscription site.

[\[*\]](#) The Lonely Century How to Restore Human Connection in a World That's Pulling Apart by Noreena Hertz Feb 2021 Currency Publishing (All statistics mentioned in this paragraph is from the book).

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