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Metropolis

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DANIEL FLEISCHMAN

Metropolis

Metro; Mother. Polis; City. From the Greek. Cities have mass. Concrete a thousand feet skyward weighs down on onlookers and inhabitants, stalwart against updrafts and the disbelief in tourists' crooked necks. The heights of human civilization. Metropolis—a culmination of geography we carry on hunched shoulders.

By all accounts, New York City is crowded. Bridges crowd, buildings crowd, people crowd. I crowd around a stage with strangers. My mother sits to my left, holding my hand with the soft palm of hers. Her hand is warm compared to the cool wood armrest under my five-year-old hand. My eyes bound between a golden yellow dress and a rose in a glass case. Song mixes with the faint perfume my mother always mists for rare occasions. The scent is inseparable from the concentric teardrops of her rose gold necklace she adorns above her maroon blouse. The lighting from the stage draws amber streaks out of the light brown curls that frame her round face. Her smile is slight, content. I smile, too. The Beast dances with Belle, lamenting their plights, and I feel the weight of the city for the first time: below the architecture, below the culture, below the skyline, I catch glimpses of our home thirty miles north. My earliest memory of the city.

"Where'd you get all these stamps, Mom?" This world is quieter, less exaggerated.

"I've just collected them over the years." A few hundred stamps spread across our dining room table, the ones you press into ink to replicate a little design. I love the dragonfly one. The smooth hourglass of the wooden handle contours into my palm. We're under the warm light of the dining room table chandelier. There are other markers, crayons, and paints scattered around like

a technicolor hurricane. I eye the markers with the little shapes instead of tips; a flourish of tiny green dog paws is my signature; its good enough for a seven-year-old. We're making cards for something, someone. Newspapers underlay the messier activities. I clutch the dragonfly stamp.

"You've got to push down really hard, so it gets enough ink," Mom says, opening the ink pad's plastic case for me. I do as I'm told. I put as much effort as I can into the stamp. Drops of ink form on either side.

"Like this?" I ask between strained grimaces.

"Maybe a little too hard." Mom puts her hand on mine and lifts it up off the pad a little. Her hands are soft and clean. My hands are a mess of green marker, blue paint, and a ladybug my mother stamped on earlier. She puts her focus back into her paintbrush, the kind with a little sponge at the end. I want to be like my mother, engaged in the creation of something. I put my hand over a scrap of forest green construction paper and stamp the dragonfly, testing it out a few times. I put one on my card.

There's innocence here in the suburbs. Expanses of nuclear families holed up in their hollows. There's no expectation of appearances in a shadow—no real history or culture to behold. But it feels less developed, as if the achievements of mankind suddenly stop where the Hudson meets the Harlem River. All one can do is live. But there are hints, hints brought back by suit-and-tied commuters and family day trips, allowing culture to leach out from population centers—where mothers take sons to see musicals and to dream a bit bigger than their bedroom walls.

For every center, for every polis, there is a periphery eternally in the wings. It's called Suburbia. To be sub, below, the urban, the city. From the Latin. Like subterranean subway cars. New York City exerts a pressure of wonder in tow behind the smog. We always ride the train into and back out of the city. Metro North goes right through Croton–Harmon station, a two-minute car ride from our home up on the steep eastern slope of the Hudson Valley. I always think the train station looks like a spider with broken legs, zig-zagged and straddling above the railways. Rail lines spread like a spider's web across the tri-state area, the metropolitan area, radiating out from the center.

They're habitual: the train rides. My mother doesn't like to ride backwards for the hour on the train. She gets nauseous, but New York City is there, so we go. I watch the Hudson River fly by between cattails, graffitied tunnels, and rocky shores. The Tappan Zee, the old rusted, steel one since demolished (the new one is futuristic and grand, straightedge), flies over head. It's the same path I've travelled since I was five, the same sticky plastic upholstery of Metro North seats. *Mother North*, that's funny, just like my mother who nods off next to me as we rumble toward Grand Central once again.

"I love you, Sweetie," whispers the wall.

"Oh my gosh! I can hear you!" I say back to the beige tiles. My mother is twenty or so feet away, facing a corner, back turned to me. I'm doing the same, back turned to her. In the dining concourse of Grand Central Terminal, there's an intersection between the foot ramp up to Forty-Second Street and the entrance to the Oyster Bar. The domed ceiling carries words from corner to opposite corner, privacy from the line of other tourists waiting their turn. The secret of the architecture is a miracle to a ten-year-old.

"They have a table inside. Let's go eat," my mother says to the wall, referring to our large group of neighbors taking an excursion into the city.

"But I don't like seafood."

"I know. They'll have something else," she reassures me. I leave my corner and we walk in together. It's dimly lit, and the air is heavy, stagnant. I look at the tank full of rubber-banded lobsters and pinch my nose.

"It smells like fish in here."

"You'll get used to it," my mother says, not giving in to my whines as she drags me along by my wrist. I'd rather be outside whispering anonymous messages into the wall, pretending to be a ghost. We sit down at a long table for our party of twelve. My mother directs me to sit next to my sister, despite my protests. She meets my father and the other adults at the far end of the table.

Soon platters of oysters arrive in ice baths on freezing aluminum plates. My scrunched-up nose signals my mother to come over. I smell her perfume again as she reaches down between us to grab an oyster. She teaches me and my sister how to eat them. Pick up a nice juicy one, holding the ugly, bumpy underside with one hand. Use the little fork to detach the meat from the slick, pearly interior. Squeeze some lemon juice on it and drip on some cocktail sauce. Slurp in, chew a little, swallow.

"Go ahead, try it."

I watch my mother demonstrate the final step. I watch the other adults indulge. I want to be like them, in the city doing fancy, sophisticated things. I need to live up to the genius and aesthetic of the city planted above my head. I am in its roots; I have to act like it. I tilt my head back and try to swallow as fast as I can. I taste acid combined with the salty water of the lower Hudson. It has the consistency of snot and is about to slide down my throat. I think of pearls and Aphrodite, as I've been told oysters are an aphrodisiac, though I thought that was just related to the goddess. I think of the famous constellated ceiling a hundred feet above my head, then through the ceiling, through its admirers gazing upward, and I wonder where Venus is on the celestial map. I think of Manhattan like a grimy pearl, rising out of the polluted harbor seafoam along with the skyline, and I want to rise too. I forget to chew, but

I manage to keep the oyster down. We find our way back home to our place on the bumpy shell. I get used to my suburban shell. I get used to the smell.

Comfort is slow and all-consuming. At fifteen, I'm growing. My legs grow longer, my arteries stretch, and I ache. "Stand up straight" becomes my mother's most common refrain. My height becomes a constant shifting with the command of her words. Perspectives shift in puberty, along with posture. At some point, I begin to value space over potential discomfort. And New York City is crowded. The novelty of the LED screens of Times Square gives way to the smell of piss and exhaust. The crystal ball that drops every New Year's stops being crystal. The thought of people looking at me strangely for looking up at expanses of glass windows becomes more painful than missing out or the strain in my neck. The heights of civilization become a hassle to climb, the view stops mattering when my suburban bed is soft.

My mother pushes me. I try to oblige. I join Model UN, representing Jamaica—the country, not Queens—and spend an April weekend in New York. The hotel is large and in Midtown. We ride the train into Grand Central and I watch the floor tiles go by underfoot, conscious to not look up like all the tourists. I wear baggy jeans and a brown sweatshirt that I wear every day to school. I carry a blue duffle bag of dress shirts and an ill-fitting blazer as naturally as I can, trying to live up to the mystique of the city despite my resentment, my weak attempt to blend in. Architecture, no matter how grand, can only hide people for so long.

We get to the hotel where the convention is being held, and it's just tall, nothing more. Each meeting I attend has a silent Jamaica. I go to meetings in windowless rooms with other teenagers who are driven to engage. I'm adamant in keeping quiet for two days. I eat gyros from a Zagat-rated food stand with a wooden structure and plexiglass door to make it a restaurant, not confident enough to go beyond a hundred feet from the hotel. I'm embarrassed of the fancy suit I'm wearing. The velcro of the wallet I have never used before grates on my ears even more than the car horns. It's nighttime, but the city refuses to get dark. Streetlights, buildings, everything lights up, exposing, rendering all of me in full color. The buildings are not artistic expressions of modernity anymore; they are slabs of concrete and rebar, blocking out the moon and stars. The wind follows the streets as artificial channels, and it blows around my brown waves of hair.

I find it hard to breathe in a space so disassociated. People walk in their own directions, no eye contact, just existing in the same space. The buildings do not waver like me as they rise. The air itself is forced to be there, to enter my lungs. I'm partaking in it: the burden of the practical, running from ex-

pression. The anxiety tastes sour. I take my gyro and go back inside the hotel. I miss my home. I miss my mother.

"How was it, Honey?" my mother asks, embracing me at Croton–Harmon once we get back. I look in her hazel eyes.

"It was great," I lie. It is functional.

Walking in New York City is always touristic, a voyeuristic sensation from looking into a world that isn't mine. No matter how logical the gridlines or how enthusiastically I greet the apathy of the city, it seems foreign. The edges are so sharp, the spires ready to pierce the sky. Architecture caught between opulence of Beaux Arts and Art Deco and Modernist all at odds with one another; the first ingrained in the wealth of the past, the second caught up in the industrial aspirations of the Interwar, the third obsessed with form that follows function. A place where the MetLife Building seems to grow out from Grand Central like an opportunistic weed.

I'm used to houses with faux wood siding and rough gray shingles next to a smattering of trees. I'm used to the sugar maple in front of my home that drops leaves to rake, and the beige vinyl that's shown off to disorganized, calm roads I can navigate like nothing. I get lost on grids. My frame of mind is bound by the extraordinary ordinary, unsettled by places where sculptures grow like trees, the sky is held up by rooftops, and the basements aren't pitch black subways or oyster bars.

Six years later, I am doing laundry in my basement and I heft overstuffed hampers over the clutter. Boxes of Old Navy snow pants many sizes too small, a couple of tires next to the boiler, crates of my mother's crafting supplies (needles, multitudes of multi-color threads, cutesy stamps with associated ink, scrapbooks, pieces of wood), a knitted rainbow scarf I haven't worn since I was eight draped over a wooden rafter, the pantry where we keep cans of baked beans, more and more *things*.

The riffraff creates an aisle just wide enough to shuffle to the washer and dryer as my bare feet are sanded by concrete. I knock into a picture frame, and it falls forward. I didn't know there were any paintings down here. Setting the laundry basket down on the dingy blue rug in front of the washing machine, I turn around, eyebrows raised and jaw slack. I never noticed the frame and its contents before. I pick it up.

It is a painting. No, it's flatter and cleaner than anything that could be created by brush strokes. It is more of a framed poster, but matte without the high gloss. My eyes attach to the only spot of distinct color—a golden orange in a sea of blues and blacks—which runs up the plumage of a woman's headdress. What appears to be feathers, mostly orange but with accents of purple, are so large they might've come from a mythical bird deity. The feathers curve

from well below her hip back up to her head as she leans back, well aware of her grace. Her skin is pure white, her eyes more smudged dots of shadow than any realized form, and there's a little rouge on her lips. Her face, however, pales in the presence of what she wears. Once I follow the headdress up to her face, I see her dress: a patterned black broken up by gray into irregular scales. It is like a robe enveloping her, only the nape of her neck and right shoulder are exposed—sultry. It takes me a second to see the panther's head. The dress is a hide, the head forming more or less a belt, and the fangs a buckle. My eyes follow the dress down to where paws were dragging behind her obscured frame. White, horizontal lines overlay a perfect blue gradient for the background—indigo on the bottom, powder blue at the top. It doesn't occur to me until later that the artist's perspective is behind the woman, as she swaggers up the gradient staircase at some kind of high fashion gala, walking away from me. A vision of the Art Deco.

It's a serigraph: a type of print that utilizes silk to transfer color. Which is appropriate considering the focus on fashion. Thoughts beyond staring are lost on me, though, all I can do is contemplate. In my nearly twenty years of living in this house, in the dried-out suburbs of New York, New York—of the mother city—at home is the farthest thing from what I feel in my basement now. I feel underdressed as I navel gaze at the visage, naked in my dark blue basketball shorts, white T-shirt, and uncombed hair. My slouch is heavy as I hold the woman up at arm's length.

It smells like damp wood in the basement. Though I've never seen her before, I feel like I have. There's an aesthetic of unabashed appreciation for the self, the human form, and the balance with function, something I devalued somewhere along my way. It is clear and near and muted. Distant but comforting. I take the woman, in her frame. I walk back over the exposed concrete, through the clutter, up the tarnished cream-colored steps.

"Mom, have you seen this?"

Art Deco is about access. Like the serigraph in my basement, mass-produced. Art Deco arose alongside industrialization, alongside the rise of capitalism. Magazine covers pushed out serigraphs en masse as a means to connect with people, even ones outside or tangential to the art world.

Fashion, in particular, is a vehicle to appeal to people who wanted artistry in a functional medium. Art Deco's aesthetic is clear, lines and curves, with obvious subject matter. It's caught between the practical and the aesthetic. A blend of form and function.

But excitement and economies grow stable after world wars. Form, creativity for its own sake, is lost. Art Deco morphs into the modernist movement. Architecture captures the essence best with its axiom: "form follows

function." Buildings like the Twin Towers, hailed as "filing cabinets" unrelenting in their commitment to run-of-the-mill, straight-edge capitalism, no access through beauty. It became the norm for city centers and skyscrapers; no new Chrysler Buildings. But the Chrysler Building's spire still flares out like a dress from a serigraph. The aesthetic, however ornamental, still exists.

I'm seeing a Broadway show, *Wicked*, with my sister six months or so after meeting the Art Deco woman. We pass the outer side of Thirty Rockefeller Center, the skyscraper across from St. Patrick's Cathedral. It extends into the sky at right-angle steps forming stairways to the gods flanking a central block. As the sides of the building reach the top, they increase in frequency, mimicking a low-resolution logarithmic curve. From afar or a bird's eye view, it appears to be carved, curving into a smooth, aerodynamic fin for the island of Manhattan, made up by skinny rectangular prisms—a mixed form between straight lines and sweeping curves. Some office space is sacrificed in the name of sculpture. 1939; Firm Art Deco.

At the base, staring down the Gothic Revival cathedral, stands Atlas—cast in bronze—along Fifth Avenue. I look up at the statue. He holds up the heavens, a stellar globe reduces to four rings wrapping around each other. I think of my mother's necklace. Entire solar systems rests on the backs of the titan cursed to hold up the sky. Skyscrapers are condemned to the same fate, pushing against gravity, resisting the irresistible. Forward progress in the name of greatness.

What must it be like to struggle with the weight of the world? New York City holds up the excellence of a species in a sphere of intense proximity but is burdened by unfamiliarity. Suburbia—below the city—supports the polis by providing a foundation, as the base of Thirty Rockefeller tapers out behind the statue. Each identical house is a new world held up by families. An oyster presenting a pearl. A mother carrying her child.

Man builds up the geography, the context, and struggles against it. The artificial and the natural conflict in waterways and landscapes, each yearning to take over or reclaim the other. The sky is heavy, heavier than buildings and cities. Function crushes creativity; efficiency overtakes aesthetic. But in art, in Art Deco, the context of a modernizing world in its infancy mixes with realities of engineering. Art Deco, like New York, like Suburbia, like me, comes to be characterized by the tension of contexts. Tension defines art forms, places. Art Deco: a transition between prosperity and ambition for more. New York: a single point of geography turned crossroads of the world made of concrete and dreams. Suburbia: a tourist in the shadow of Atlas. Me: my mother's son who was overwhelmed by even that. I straighten my back, turn, and run after my sister. Atlas strains against the weight of the globe behind me.