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There’s an exquisite short story by the writer Laurie Colwin that perfectly captures the lure of living in other people’s houses. The story, which is called “The Lone Pilgrim,” is about a sensitive and rather lonely young book illustrator whose greatest pleasure is being the ideal houseguest and observing firsthand what she describes as “the closed graceful shapes of other people’s lives.”

She spends an October night when the moon is full in an old house in a college town, a sleeping dog by the stove, an apple pie in the oven, and atop a window ledge a jar of homemade jam and cuttings of grape ivy in a cracked mug. A rainy night that reminds her of England finds her in a 19th-century brownstone where the mood is set by polished molding, leaded windows, a Spode platter, and a walnut dining table. On yet another occasion, she is ensconced in a house in Maine where the décor includes fancy-back spoons and bouquets of dried flowers in lusterware pitchers.

“The Lone Pilgrim” was published in 1981, a moment when people were becoming increasingly obsessed with the places where they lived, be it lovingly restored town house or reclaimed loft in an abandoned industrial district. But the story speaks to us not simply because Colwin captured a shred of the zeitgeist or because of her lapidary prose. We’re also drawn to the subject matter. We’re fascinated by what homes and their contents reveal about other people’s lives. That’s one reason so many people love Victorian novels, with their wealth of domestic detail and their lush evocation of the rooms in which characters’ lives unfold. That’s why readers are drawn to shelter magazines, with their almost pornographic depictions of lustrous marble and gnarled wood and buttery leather upholstery. It’s no accident that people sometimes have dreams about finding secret attics or long-forgotten cellars. They seem to be searching for the perfect home even while asleep.
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I myself have lived in a few remarkable places, among them the parlor floor of a brownstone straight out of a coming-of-age movie set in Greenwich Village, a prewar building on the Upper West Side at a time when iconic haunts such as the Thalia movie theater and the New Yorker Bookstore still defined the neighborhood, and, for much of my adult life, an apartment in Brooklyn Heights with a spectacular view of the Lower Manhattan skyline and the New York harbor. And for the past few years, I had a chance to follow in the footsteps of Colwin’s heroine, sort of, by way of a column called Habitats that appeared regularly in the Real Estate section of The New York Times.

Habitats, which was published every week or so and focused on the residents of an individual house or apartment, was a fixture of the Real Estate section from the early 1990s until late 2012. The column endured even in a rapidly changing media environment, I suspect, because readers of The Times yearned not only to master the complexities of fixed-rate mortgages and to learn how to outwit finicky co-op boards. They also had an intense desire to look behind other people’s front doors and peer into their lives.

In the column’s original form, Habitats drew its subject matter from throughout the New York metropolitan area and concentrated largely on matters of design and décor. I’m as much of a sucker as the next person for crown moldings and wide-plank floors. But when I took over the column in the spring of 2009, I realized that I could use this franchise of precious journalistic real estate for a different purpose.

I wanted to use the column to tell more intimate stories. I wanted to use the physical nature of a home as a wedge to delve into personal history, and to produce, as one reader nicely put it, biography through real estate. I loved that phrase because it struck me as a wonderfully apt description of exactly what I was trying to do. The lives of the people who inhabited these places were easily as absorbing as the homes themselves, often far more so, and the intersection between person and place was endlessly provocative, endlessly engaging.

I had other goals. As is evident from the 40 columns in this collection, expanded versions of pieces that were originally published in the newspaper, I wanted the columns to range as widely as possible in terms of the subjects’ ages, ethnic backgrounds, professions, family structure, and socioeconomic status. At the same time, I wanted to focus on people who lived within the five boroughs.
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It’s hard to imagine richer and more varied subject matter than the places New Yorkers call home. There may be eight million stories in the Naked City, as the tagline to the old TV show puts it. But there are also nearly three million dwelling places, ranging from Park Avenue palaces to Dickensian garrets and encompassing much in between. The physical details of these residences—the décor, the keepsakes, the money spent, the junk amassed—are invariably fascinating. In a city so rich in architectural history and variety of family type, ethnic background, economic status, and personal taste, what you find when you walk through someone else’s front door can’t help but be intriguing.

And taken as a whole, the columns also offer a mosaic of domestic life in one of the great cities of the world. They open windows onto forgotten corners of a huge metropolis—the beachfront cottage at the end of the subway line, the dingy apartment in a public housing tower, the basement studio invisible from the street. They introduce us to neighborhoods so exotic they might be on the other side of the globe. They bear witness to the justly famed variety of New York architecture—converted tenements, co-ops born of the political passion of an earlier era, gracious brownstones, jaw-dropping mansions. They remind us that economic inequality defines New York as it defines few other places.

The stories of the largely unknown New Yorkers who inhabit these homes are compelling. What are their dreams, their fears, their obsessions, their secrets? What does the place where they live reveal about who they really are and who they long to be? And there’s an even more provocative question to be asked: What makes a home in New York distinctive, even singular? Expressed another way, what do New York’s houses and apartments have in common with one another, despite their varied faces? What can be said about these homes that can’t be said of the homes of Bostonians or Vermonters or the suburbanites of Westchester County?

The answers are elusive.

Despite all that has been written about the city in the four centuries since the first Europeans set foot on what came to be known as New York, and despite the exploding number of works exploring the nature of domestic life and its impact on our souls and our psyches, the literature on the intersection of these two subjects is unexpectedly thin. Much of what we know we’ve learned from novelists such as Edith Wharton, whose depictions of Gilded Age New York echo in our minds every time we walk down certain gracious, tree-lined streets, or from historians such
as Robert Caro, whose horrific descriptions of the slums of the South Bronx in his biography of Robert Moses are nearly as terrifying as the real thing.

There are also a handful of classic essays that help define what it means to be a New Yorker and how people make a place for themselves in this most rewarding and challenging of settings. One of the most memorable of these essays is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “My Lost City,” a work that captures the texture of New York life at two pivotal points in its history. In 1919, Fitzgerald wrote, that shining moment just after the First World War, “New York had all the iridescence of the beginning of the world,” and the city seemed “wrapped cool in its mystery and promise.” A dozen years later, he bitterly concluded that New York “no longer whispers of fantastic success and eternal youth,” that “all is lost save memory.” Like generations before him, Fitzgerald had come to New York to invent himself, to realize passionately held dreams and ambitions, but the city that once seemed a place of miracles had turned to dust.

In the celebrated essay “Goodbye to All That,” Joan Didion charted the trajectory of a similarly doomed love affair. When Didion moved to New York in the mid-’50s at the age of 20, she, like Fitzgerald, fell passionately in love with her adopted home. “New York was no mere city,” Didion wrote of her heady first impressions. “It was instead an infinitely romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself.” Eight years later, her ardor had cooled. “I talk about how difficult it would be for us to ‘afford’ to live in New York right now,” she said of her decision to return with her husband to California, “about how much ‘space’ we would need. All I mean is that I was very young in New York, and that at some point the golden rhythm was broken, and I am not that young anymore.”

In “Moving On,” published in 2006 in The New Yorker, Nora Ephron traced the contours of an even more site-specific urban romance. The object of her affection was her five-bedroom apartment in the Apthorp, the Renaissance Revival palace on West 78th Street. Badly bruised after a divorce, Ephron had moved to the Apthorp in 1980, and for more than two decades, her besottedness with her apartment knew no bounds. “I was planning to live there forever,” she wrote. “Til death did us part.” But her rent soared, her building shed its raffish charm, and she eventually decamped across town. Although her new place proved perfectly satisfactory, something was lost. “I am never going to dream about this new apartment of mine,” Ephron concluded. “It’s not love. It’s just where I live.”
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These essays tell us a great deal about the glory and heartbreak that can await those who seek a foothold in this particular place. But the most enduring statement of what it means to be a New Yorker isn’t an account of a doomed affair or a story of dashed dreams. It’s E. B. White’s “Here Is New York,” an unabashed love letter to the city that was published in 1948 and is studded with observations about life in this city that people have been quoting for more than 60 years.

White made the buoyant pronouncement that “no one should come to New York to live unless he is willing to be lucky.” He differentiated among the three kinds of New Yorkers—the natives, the commuters, and the settlers from elsewhere who came here in quest of something and who in his opinion are the ones who give the city its passion. Writing at the dawn of the nuclear age, White offered eerie intimations of the attacks of September 11, reminding us that “a single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, . . . cremate the millions.” And he provided one of the most poignant descriptions of the bounties New York can bestow: “The gift of privacy, the jewel of loneliness.”

That White singled out loneliness and privacy as the signature benefits of a metropolis defined by density and density’s urban twin, verticality, isn’t surprising. Despite the congestion, it’s easy to find privacy in the city, which is why hidden realms flourish behind the city’s closed doors, whether it be immigrant cultures imported from half a world away or lives lived nearly off the grid even as the city thrums with ever more cutting-edge technology. Despite the fact that solitude can seem an elusive gift, there’s also truth to the cliché: it’s easy to feel alone in a crowd. During my journeys around the city, I sometimes sensed a loneliness, especially among women, no longer young, who lived by themselves. I sometimes thought of Wharton’s Lily Bart, friendless and ultimately doomed in her small, cheerless room with the flowerpot on the window ledge.

Lily Bart passed the last chapter of her life in a boarding house, but I remembered her final dwelling place as an apartment, perhaps because there’s no more defining expression of life in this tall and congested metropolis. The city is home to more than two million apartments, located not just in slender Manhattan but also in the boroughs beyond, and in their size and configuration, they’re as much an icon of New York as the skyline and Times Square. The New York apartment is the perch from
which Holly Golightly and the intrepid sisters of *Wonderful Town* set out to storm the city. The New York apartment—that is to say, a rental, not a pricy co-op—is the quintessential emblem of young life, the place where you live when you’re poor, footloose, adventurous, and more in love with the city than you’ll ever be again.

These apartments have a porous quality. Walking down a brownstone-lined street at twilight, it’s impossible not to peer into one after another lighted window and marvel at the winking chandeliers, the glossy shutters, the well-stocked bookshelves. It’s thanks to the voyeur in all of us that the film *Rear Window* has become the definitive statement about the sometimes oddly public nature of apartment life in New York. The skin separating inside and outside shifts and flutters like a theatrical scrim—one moment transparent, the next opaque.

The city’s apartments by their very nature are also apt to be small, so small that people who have an unusually large space apologize for all the rooms. Except for the extremely wealthy or the extremely lucky, chances are good that New Yorkers live in a shoebox, which is why we know the square footage of our place down to the last inch. As housing in New York grows ever costlier, some places seem so tiny as to be uninhabitable. This is especially true for people in the arts, for whom low-cost housing, no matter how confining, can mean the difference between pursuing a career in the city and slinking back home, tail between legs, to Wichita or Syracuse or Dubuque. And given all those little apartments packed tightly together, the need for temporary escape can be overwhelming, which is why New Yorkers lucky enough to have country houses consider themselves blessed beyond words.

At the same time, these little spaces frequently explode with creativity; rare is the apartment furnished entirely by way of Kmart or even Ikea, much as New Yorkers love those emporiums. Even well-heeled New Yorkers aren’t ashamed to rummage around the street (although less in the age of bedbugs) or the local Housing Works. Because everything is so compressed, the total effect is often dazzling.

All these apartments arranged like upended egg cartons guarantee that New Yorkers share a few other things. One has to do with the primacy of views, especially prized because your nearest neighbor likely lives just inches from the tip of your nose. If you have a view, you probably brag about it ad nauseam. If you don’t, maybe you have something to compensate, like a nice wood-burning fireplace.

New Yorkers are also defined by the number of stairs we climb to get to our apartments or, for the luckier among us, by the elevator. It’s
understandable that middle-class families in Brooklyn and the Bronx felt that they had arrived when they moved from a dreary walk-up to a new elevator building or, for a later generation, to that “deluxe apartment in the sky.” Understandably also, a New Yorker’s greatest fear is to be trapped in a stalled elevator. The story of the Chinese restaurant delivery man stranded for 81 hours in an elevator in a 38-story apartment house in the Bronx struck terror in many hearts; that could have been us.

Except, perhaps, in the far reaches of bucolic Staten Island, New Yorkers are also defined by the closeness of neighbors. We hear the Clementi piano exercises from across the hall, the kid upstairs endlessly bouncing a ball, the lovers’ quarrel, the slammed doors, the weeping—it’s hardly a surprise that New Yorkers are obsessed with acoustical privacy. Nor are these intrusions necessarily comforting. We smell the aroma of unfamiliar ingredients wafting down the hall; we hear languages we can’t identify in the lobby. But ideally, our closeness to one another teaches lessons of tolerance and kindness, especially in a city with such diversity, home to a record number of immigrants who maintain increasingly close ties to their homelands and are under ever less pressure to assimilate. This closeness also leads to shared memories of defining events—blackouts, doormen strikes, garbage strikes, and now trumping everything else, the attacks of September 11.

New Yorkers are defined, too, by the primacy of the subway, a system that binds even city residents who live miles from the nearest stop. And only here would people still be debating the candy-colored loops and swirls of a subway map designed four decades ago.

The novelist Jonathan Lethem once described New York as a city of “stairwells and elevator shafts,” a place of “claustrophobic compression.” That pretty much sums it up. It’s understandable that claustrophobics, terrified of elevators and other small spaces, have such a hard time here. (Acrophobics, with their fear of heights, don’t do so well either.) But as White observed 60-odd years ago, “New Yorkers do not crave comfort and convenience. If they did, they would live elsewhere.”

One reason we New Yorkers can tolerate all this congestion and compression is because our homes embrace so much of the world beyond our doors. The entire city is our front yard, our back yard, our living room, our play room. New Yorkers cram themselves into tiny apartments and endure cheek-by-jowl domestic arrangements knowing that just a few steps away is magnificent Central Park or Prospect Park or, for Brooklyn
Heights residents, the Promenade, which reminds me of some glamorous European boulevard every time I set foot on its newly restored paving blocks. Or your second home is the playground, especially at a certain stage of life. “Remember how we lived at the playground?” a mother friend from the neighborhood asked wistfully of the days when our children were young and our entire lives seemed to unfold within sight of swings and sandboxes.

The stoop, the street, even the vest-pocket park, no matter how small and scraggly—all are part of what New Yorkers talk about when they talk about home. That sentiment helps explain why New Yorkers are obsessed by their neighborhoods, right down to the sometimes cloyingly clever names (BoCoCa? BelDel?). In this city, your neighborhood is as much your home as your walk-up or your studio or your floor-through.

Jane Jacobs understood the central role of New York’s public spaces better than most; her portrait of her block of Hudson Street in Greenwich Village, with its buzzy street life and assortment of shops—the butcher, the locksmith, the fruit stand, the deli—is the best-remembered part of The Death and Life of Great American Cities, her classic study of urban life. Jacobs grasped what makes a city simultaneously vital and nurturing. And even though New York has been transformed in the half century since her book was published, despite the invasion of Duane Reades and bank branches and cell phone stores, hers is a classic description of what New Yorkers picture, or would like to picture, when they think about the street where they live.

There’s a reason that the High Line, the landscaped park built atop a historic rail line on Manhattan’s West Side, holds such a soft spot in the hearts of New Yorkers. It’s not because of its size—even when completed, the strip will extend only a mile and a half. We love this quirky new urban space because the High Line by its mere existence adds a wonderfully original room to every house and apartment in the city.

If New York is a city in which your home extends well beyond your front door, it’s also a place where a disproportionately large number of people live in places that are very old. Census data show that 85 percent of New Yorkers live in buildings erected before 1970, compared with 42 percent of Americans generally. Even more remarkably, 39 percent of New Yorkers live in buildings constructed before 1930 and 17 percent in buildings predating 1920.
Thanks to the venerable nature of New York’s housing stock, entire neighborhoods function as palimpsests of the city’s history. All those 19th-century brownstones and row houses and turn-of-the-century industrial lofts and prewar apartment houses speak so eloquently to fabled eras in the city’s history that even the most up-to-the-minute New Yorkers feel as if they live among ghosts. The past hangs heavy upon us. Neighborhoods, streets, even individual buildings are saturated with memory, serving as mute reminders of those who occupied these spaces long before we did. Their history becomes ours.

These ghosts take different forms. Many of my Habitats subjects were aware of living on the footprint of the place where their own ancestors had lived or where they themselves had lived for decades. They were conscious of living in neighborhoods with long and storied histories, such as SoHo and the brownstone districts of Manhattan and Brooklyn, or in buildings such as the bungalows of Rockaway, evocative reminders of how working-class New Yorkers passed their summers generations earlier.

Perhaps because so many New Yorkers live atop past lives, we’re also united by nostalgia for the city that was. “No matter how long you have been here, you are a New Yorker the first time you say, That used to be Munsey’s, or That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge,” Colson Whitehead wrote shortly after the attacks of September 11, a moment when people were struggling to articulate their feelings about the city that had been struck such a devastating blow. “That before the internet café plugged itself in, you got your shoes resoled in the mom-and-pop operation that used to be there. You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now.”

Even the hipster, arrived in Brooklyn minutes ago, has been known to complain, “I miss the old Brooklyn” as one more designer stroller edges into one more ultracool brunch spot in Williamsburg, a neighborhood that the writer Robert Anasi mournfully christened “the last Bohemia.” In few other cities is the longing for the golden age just beyond our reach so potent.

As neighborhoods morph before our eyes—first SoHo, then the Lower East Side, then the great swath of Brooklyn neighborhoods strung along the L line, then who knows what next—we ache for what we’ve lost. Perhaps this longing helps explain the photographs of long-departed ancestors that decorate the houses and apartments of so many of the New Yorkers I interviewed. Sometimes the ancestors aren’t even their own
but rather evocations of a communal past, as if the city’s bureaus and night tables and living room walls functioned like the totem poles of the Northwest Coast Indians, carved with beavers and ravens and whales that represent various faces of a shared history.

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Just as the history of New York’s streets and buildings and neighborhoods becomes our history, so are our feelings about where we live defined by cultural artifacts that have taken the city as their subject matter. Consciously or not, when New Yorkers talk about home, we’re often talking about a scene from a movie or a lyric from a song. These words and images teach us how to be New Yorkers and, as surely as all those apps and guidebooks, show us what sorts of lives are possible here—bohemian catch-as-catch-can lives on the once-scruffy Lower East Side, lives of liberal respectability in the apartment houses of the Upper West Side, cozy domesticity in the brownstones of Park Slope, moneyed elegance in the town houses of the Upper East Side. They tell us how others have lived here in the past and how we ourselves might live. In these creations, we find templates for our own existences.  

New York is hardly unique in having inspired a cultural outpouring of such scope. Even people who have never set foot in London or Paris or San Francisco feel as if they know these cities intimately, thanks to books they’ve read, movies they’ve watched, songs they’ve listened to. But to name all the works of art inspired by New York would be a nearly impossible task.

And so we see the city through artists’ eyes. Walking down certain streets, New Yorkers of a certain generation invariably remember Wharton’s observation about buildings that look as if they’ve been coated with cold chocolate sauce. They circle Washington Square with the friendly companionship of Henry James. They see the hand of Edward Hopper in every water tower, the hand of Alfred Stieglitz or Edward Steichen in the image of the Flatiron Building on a rainy night. In their mind, they hear the mournful strains of Simon and Garfunkel while waiting for a train in a grimy subway station.

We learn of New York’s giddiness from Fitzgerald and from such novels as Bright Lights, Big City. We learn of its loneliness from the Delmore Schwartz story “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” and its surliness from Richard Prince. We learn of its exuberance through the musical On the Town, its misery through Rent. Sometimes the work of art seems more authentic than the real thing. Above my living room sofa hangs an en-
graving of the Brooklyn waterfront in winter, circa 1820, showing tiny bundled-up figures set against small clapboard houses. When I picture my neighborhood, this is the image in my mind’s eye.

Music captures what it means to be a New Yorker in almost hallucinatory fashion, especially the romance of Manhattan at a certain giddy moment in the city’s history. Wilfrid Sheed, in his book *The House That George Built*, explains why so much of the American songbook has shaped our perceptions of what it means to live in New York and to be a New Yorker. Except for Cole Porter, Sheed reminds us, “all the first generation of the Jazz Age were city guys writing primarily for city people”—and not just city guys but New York guys: Izzy Baline from the Lower East Side, who became Irving Berlin of the Upper East Side, and especially George Gershwin, that quintessential Upper West Sider and unrivaled interpreter of the soundscape that is New York. “Gershwin captured the screaming clangor of New York,” Sheed reminds us. “Gershwin was Times Square at night, and skyscrapers and jackhammers by day.”

If music provides the soundtrack for the life a New Yorker might lead, movies furnish the pictures and have ever since the dawn of the art form. In large part, the city has been defined for us by flickering images on a screen; as James Sanders writes in *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies*, “Alongside the real city in which we live, there exists a mythic New York, a dream city, brought to life in thousands of feature films, which for generations has captured the imagination of people all around the world.” People from elsewhere frequently confess that this “movie city” played a significant role in bringing them to New York, and on some level, they believe that this dream city will be waiting for them once they arrive. They expect to see Fred and Ginger dancing across the rooftops.

In enumerating the movies that have shaped our impression of the city, the temptation is to simply tick off title after title. From the years before and after the Second World War: *The Thin Man, Marty, Sweet Smell of Success*, and *On the Waterfront*. From the ’60s: *Midnight Cowboy, Rosemary’s Baby* (with its brooding images of the Dakota), and of course *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. From the ’70s, the decade that produced some of the greatest movie portraits of the city: *Klute, Carnal Knowledge, Death Wish, Harry and Tonto, The Taking of Pelham 123, Saturday Night Fever, An Unmarried Woman* (costarring a spectacular Upper East Side apartment coveted by many members of the audience), *The French Connection, The Wanderers*, and *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*. From the
‘80s and ‘90s: Sophie’s Choice, Tootsie, Ghostbusters, Desperately Seeking Susan, Wall Street, Crossing Delancey, and Working Girl.

And of course there’s Woody Allen’s trio of rhapsodic valentines to the city—Manhattan, Annie Hall, and Hannah and Her Sisters—along with everything by Spike Lee, nearly everything by Sidney Lumet and Martin Scorsese, and a few memorable cinematic portraits by Nora Ephron. Brooklyn has inspired a whole subset of films, among them Moonstruck, adored even though it plays fast and loose with the borough’s geography, and The Squid and the Whale, the definitive portrait of the early days of gentrification in Park Slope. And an entire generation has been schooled as to what it’s like to be a New Yorker, thanks to TV series such as Seinfeld and 20 years of television’s Law & Order, not to mention reruns likely to continue into the next millennium.

Along with instructing us on how to be New Yorkers, this cultural outpouring nourishes our sense that we live in a place of importance. E. B. White reminds us that New Yorkers share “the sense of belonging to something unique, cosmopolitan, mighty and unparalleled,” and to a great extent these cultural artifacts reinforce the feeling that we live in a singular, world-class city. When Frank Sinatra sings those rousing words, “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere,” he touches a nerve because he reminds us how proud we can be to live in this maddening, challenging place. So does the rapper Jay-Z, who updated those sentiments for a new generation: “Yeah, I’m out that Brooklyn, now I’m down in TriBeCa, right next to DeNiro, but I’ll be ’hood forever, I’m the new Sinatra, and . . . since I made it here, I can make it anywhere.” Jay-Z’s words are cooler, but the sentiment remains the same.

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Nora Ephron confessed that she had dreams about her old apartment. For a great many New Yorkers, however, such dreams take the shape of nightmares. Despite the sheen, New York is an ever more formidable place. In terms of money, space, and the pace of urban life, the city is daunting on many levels. The real estate maze presents a legendary obstacle course, or as Jack Donaghy summed up the situation in the TV series 30 Rock, “In Manhattan real estate, there are no rules; it’s like check-in at an Italian airport.” If you’re young and starting out in New York, few things are more stressful than finding a place to live. As prices soar, a task that was never easy has become apocalyptically difficult.

And while the rewards are great, among them the chance to escape a stifling small town or to establish an apartment out from under the
parental thumb or to live among like-minded peers in a neighborhood vibrant with youth and creativity, these rewards are hard won. As the gap between rich and poor grows cavernous, as the middle class shrinks, the financial grid that governs life in the metropolis offers little give, especially for people just beginning their lives here.

For newcomers, the challenges are especially arduous. When they arrive, they must make radical adjustments on every front—space, costs, logistics, and much else. Typically they move again and again, seeking something better, escaping something awful. The competition—for the apartment, the job, the boyfriend, the perfect shoes—can overwhelm. The fear of missing out—the dreaded FOMO—can prove paralyzing. The city’s nonstop contentiousness can rub raw the most resilient New Yorker. It’s hardly surprising that even ardent New Yorkers have a complicated love-hate relationship with the city, complaining endlessly about the rents, the subway, the cops, the mayor, the traffic, the crowds, you name it, even while insisting that they wouldn’t leave for the world.

Some people adapt gracefully and creatively. Others tell horror stories. When Sinatra sings that anthem, he’s acknowledging New Yorkers’ pride of place but also offering a tip of the hat to the challenges they face in creating a life for themselves here.

And so when you return to the place where you live, the relief is palpable. I remember thinking this on the night of a terrible storm when my daughter, wet and bedraggled at the end of a long day in Manhattan, finally made her way back to Brooklyn. “All I wanted was to get home,” she announced as she straggled in, soaked but triumphant. And I was glad she had made it.