



Upfront

I don't miss my old neighborhood in New York, or my former life. It's distant to me, foreign. Interesting, but without emotional sway. A quaint collection of memories like a movie that tells someone else's story: Familiar in ways, but fictional at its core. I visit there – both my once-upon-a-time city and my recollections of another existence – but I don't romanticize an inevitable return.

So, my melancholy is a surprise.

As I drift southwest from Chelsea and the blocks that surround my former urban home, the primal grit of the Meatpacking District fails to show itself. Stout men in long white work coats smeared with darkening crimson reminders of taken lives don't line loading bays and smoke cigarettes down past their filter lines, anymore. Offal doesn't clumsily surf hose-borne streams in search of nearby storm drains. Evidence of forever-lost and often cruel customs of human hegemony has been replaced by a Gucci boutique, a full-block working monument to all-things-Google, an ersatz French brasserie, a Starbucks Reserve Roastery big enough to shelter a fleet of cargo jets, perfectly level cobblestones streets that don't appreciate their own irony, and planter boxes where there was once morning-after puke.

Things change.

In New York, where exaggeration is the local dialect, evolution prefers cataclysm to grace. Change is constant and unapologetic; relentless and jarring; amazing and awful; life and death. Dusk in the city is painfully gorgeous. December exalts the dark's domain.

I've turned away from the fancy ward that has arisen from animal filth, towards the innards of a more stubborn New York – a warren of public housing with bodegas and kabob carts and chain drug stores and smoke shops on the tips of its tentacles. What it lacks in visual

interest it makes up for in hopelessness, biding its time until a developer finds the right civil servant to bribe. For now, the buildings stand unusually far from one another. Residents might not enjoy upward mobility, but they have access to considerable greenish space.

I turn again, directly eastward, into the middle of the island and its densest parts. Here, late afternoon is especially heartbreaking. It comes early. Sidewalks fill. Traffic throbs through the borough's arteries, its rhythms uneven, chaotic and comforting, all at once. Bars and restaurants – those fierce enough to remain – awaken. Windows release light that floats elegantly through the crevasses between opposing concrete faces, like an endless corps of tiny ballerinas dancing on the wind. The mood is both relief and resignation. It's nice and it's not.

Nighttime paints the world in a conspicuously realistic style. Lines are crisp, sharp. With brutal honesty, geometry conveys the stories to which color alludes apprehensively in the light of day. Souls flush themselves of restraint come nightfall. Things happen with urgency. Each sunset a reminder of our daily certainty – another step towards looming death.

It's not by accident, then, that New Year's Eve is one of the year's shortest days...or longest nights. We celebrate renewal. Though it's as much a distraction from the unceasing disappearance of time. Per the optimist: Today, we begin anew, fresh. Full of aspirations. Wholly alive. Alternatively: Like a sinister secret, we're cheering our inevitable demise.

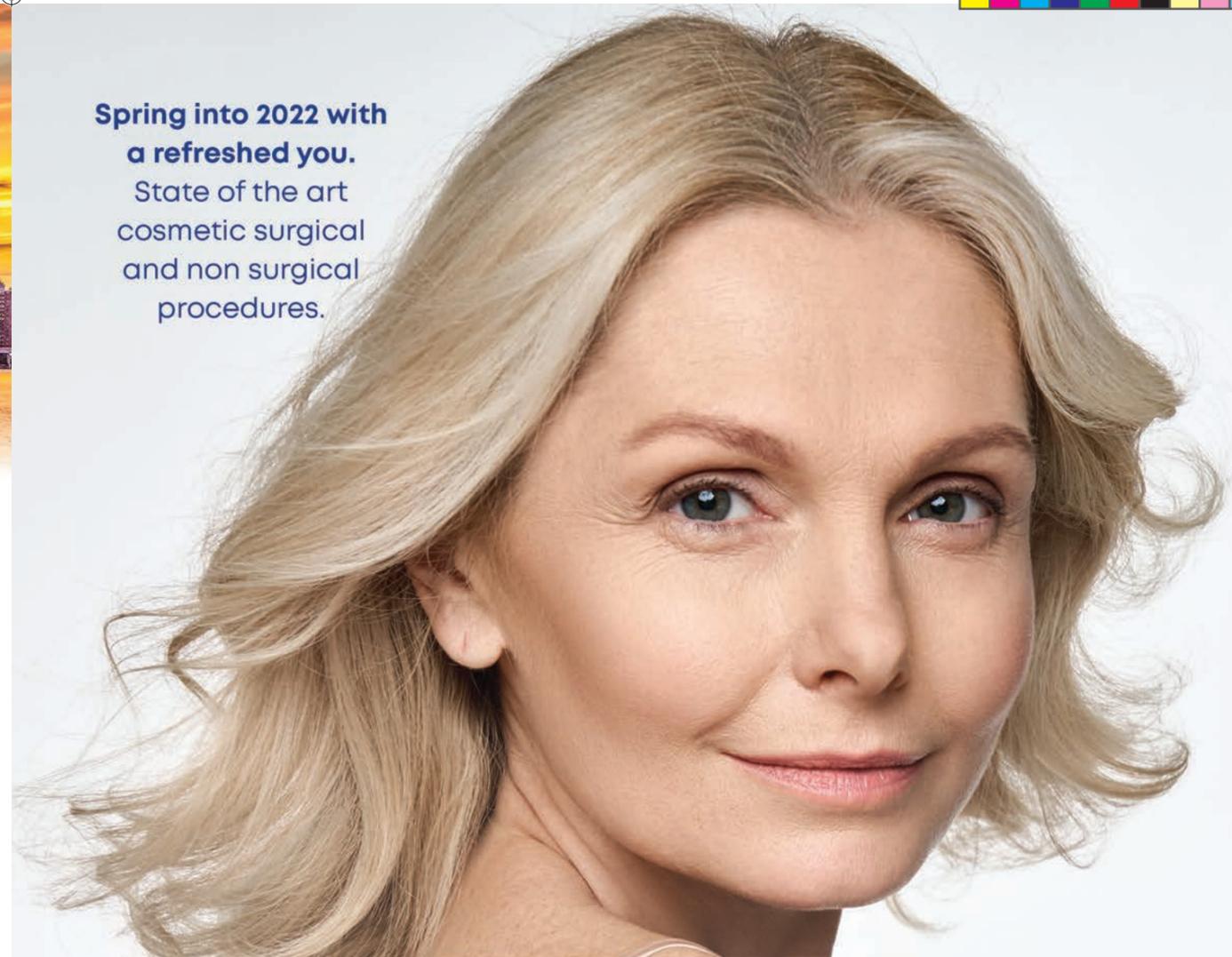
These are the thoughts that I silently wrestle, wishing I could lose them in the city's noise. This is what hijacks my mind when the sliver of sky straight above 17th Street is starless and shoe-leather black. This is the relentless power of the New York night.

It's not as sad as it might sound. There's magic in unvarnished truth. And truth is written in precise hand when framed by a lightless void. What is the plain truth? As the nights stretch to their fullest reach, as the calendar faces its obsolescence, as dark marries cold, so does another year faithfully begin.

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