

THE CITY

By Phoebe Hebert

The last time I visited New York City, it was January of 2020, and the city was completely snowless. I was there with my mother and my sister, and we were visiting my grandparents for a few days, as we often do. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. None of us could have known that in just a few months, the city would be rendered unrecognizable, and I would soon go longer without seeing it than I have ever gone. I miss the time I have lost there. But in its absence, my love for the city has only grown stronger.

To my mother, the city is her former home, one that she is glad to have left. To her, the traffic is atrocious, the crowds suffocating, and all the former cool places closed or gentrified. After being born and raised there, a total of thirty years, she would be happiest if she never lived there again. I have seen the worst the city offers firsthand, and I do not idolize that place, but I still wish it could have been mine. What would I be like if my mother had never moved out, if she had raised me and my sister in the city? I imagine I would have felt a certain pride, to be at the epicenter of the world, to have that famous city belong to me completely. It is only half mine, a home that I never lived in, but a home that carries so much of my history and who I am.

While we were there in January, we visited the New York Public Library. I had never been to it before. I was expecting floors and floors of tall shelves filled with books to get lost in, so you can imagine my disappointment when all I found was an icy, museum-like interior, all the books sectioned off in some other part. I found out that the real reason

we had come there, the reason my mother had brought us, was the J.D. Salinger exhibit.

The *Catcher in the Rye* is one of my mother's favorite books, and contains the origin of my name. Phoebe, Holden's little sister, the girl who always knows exactly what the hell you're talking about. The first time I tried to read the book, I didn't understand it. *Why is this book so famous?* I asked my mother, when I was about halfway through it. *Nothing even happens!*

Don't think of it as a famous book, she said. Just read it as you would any other book, and you'll get it. As I finished the book with tears sparkling in my eyes, I knew she was right. I've read the book many times since then, and I love it more and more with every last page. Of all the books that take place in the city, this is the one that truly gets what it's all about. The city in the book is darker and harsher than the one I know, but I still recognize it. I know inside and out the museum where Holden waits for Phoebe, and I can see the streets in my mind where they argue. The sky of the book I picture vividly, the thick, grey expanse surrounded by endlessly tall buildings that look like they have always been there.

After waiting in line to get our tickets, we were finally allowed into the exhibit. It was a small room with people milling about, paraphernalia from Salinger's life all about. His letters, passages of early drafts of his books, and his original cover for the *Catcher in the Rye*. Though it was fascinating, I did inevitably lose interest quicker than my mother did. I tried to appreciate everything that was there, but there is only so much time one can spend looking over the same few items with continued absorption. I exited the Salinger exhibit with my sister while my mother stayed inside. The two of us

wandered around the library, visited the gift shop, and attempted to find a water fountain. We were free to roam around, with no one to restrict where we could go.

New York City is the best for wandering. It might as well have been made for it. There are no destinations when you walk down the city streets, only intentions that sometimes work out. I don't have the knowledge to find my way around, so I am always lost in the city. The streets lead to the end of time and I never know where I am going, but I walk them anyway. They duplicate and multiply, blocks and blocks repeating themselves, the strange mechanics of the city. Every time I'm in the subway stations, the strangeness is especially apparent. I gawk at everything around me, staring at the people rushing past, playing music openly, going about their day. I am always blown away by how many kinds of people there are. I know my staring probably gives away that I don't belong there, but for just a second, I don't mind not fitting in.

Thinking of it now, I am struck by what a specific feeling that library had. The dense, sour smell of the metal, the rustling of winter jackets and muted sounds of city life, the smooth gleam of the marble accents. It is the same feeling that saturates every aspect of the city. A feel unique to the city, one that could not exist anywhere else, but almost impossible to put into concrete words. I could only describe it as being The City. From my perspective, the dirtiest and grimeiest parts of the city are identical to the Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Opera House, the New York Public Library, because they all share the feel of the city. It dulls the landmarks and adds an excitement to the mundane monotony of getting from one to another. It is not the feel that belongs to a tourist, nor of a local, but one that is all my own.

When my mother tells me stories of the city she grew up in, I listen close. I want to know everything. I want to see it. I know the city's changed since then, and my childhood will always be so different from hers, but everything she describes is within me. Her city. My city. It lives in my heart and in my stomach, and it always will.

At some point, me and my sister went back to collect our mother, and we left the library, back out onto city streets. We traveled home by subway, back to my grandparents' house to continue the rest of our vacation. On that subway seat, the least interesting part of the day to everyone else, my excitement and love for the city came alive. I was a little kid again, the kid within me who never stopped being mesmerized by hands gripping subway poles, bags jostling in people's laps, faces quiet and bored, settled into a gentle routine. I can see it now, the individuals around me who made up the city, unaware of how lucky they were, and me, in pure amazement. My mother beside me, my joy can hardly be contained.