

January



*January 25, 1947*

Something is about to happen. You can count the minutes in your life when something happens. Strokes of light sweep the ground, shining red and green; it's a gala evening, a late-night party—my party. Something does happen: the propellers turn faster and faster, the engines engage. My heart can't follow them. In a single movement the red beacons are crushed to the earth. In the distance, the lights of Paris flicker, sober stars rising from a dark blue abyss.

There. It's happened. I'm flying to New York. It's true. The loudspeaker called out, "Passengers bound for New York . . .," and the voice had the familiar accent of all voices heard through loudspeakers on station platforms. Paris–Marseilles, Paris–London, Paris–New York. It's only a trip, a passage from one place to another. That's what the voice was saying; that's what is written on the steward's blasé face. Because of his job, he finds it quite natural that I'm flying to America. There is only one world, and New York is a city of the world. But no. Despite all the books I've read, the films, the photographs, the stories, New York is a legendary city in my past; there is no path from the reality to the legend. Across from old Europe, on the threshold of a continent populated by 160 million people, New York belongs to the future. How could I jump wholeheartedly over my own life? I try to reason with myself—New York is real and present—but this feeling persists. Usually, traveling is an attempt to annex a new object to my universe; this in itself is a fascinating undertaking. But today it's different: I feel I'm leaving my life behind. I don't know if it will be through anger or hope, but something is going to be revealed—a world so full, so rich, and so unexpected that I'll have the extraordinary adventure of becoming a different me.

The smooth flight is already a promise: I've already escaped myself. The earth has slipped to the bottom of an alien ether. I am nowhere: I am *elsewhere*. And what time is it? What season are we in? It's summer in the Azores, in the shade of broad straw hats. The

ground of Newfoundland is covered with snow and frost. It's eight o'clock in Paris and two o'clock in New York. Time and space are intertwined. My dreams are less extravagant than this great wing I'm attached to, gliding motionless between clouds and stars.

I've slept. I open my eyes. In the black sky carpeting the abyss, horizontal, stationary fireworks suddenly explode: stars, webs, circles, showers of multicolored lights. Water trembles between the glittering chandeliers. It looks like Venice gone mad. Or some great victory being celebrated on earth . . . "Boston," says the stewardess. The Puritan name evokes a city of sober stone. Traced in fire and gold on the velvet of the plain, its image looks giddy. Boston. America. I look avidly. I can't yet say, "I'm in America." In only a minute I could crash to the ground, but I'm in a sky that belongs to no continent: *the* sky. Beneath me the night gathers again; America is sleeping. But in the distance fireworks explode from a new celebration: a city, a village. It seems that in this country the stones and bricks change at night into blazing spangles; every little village is a glowing Christmas tree.

Descending from sky to earth is a small ordeal. The limpid, weightless air thickens into an atmosphere hugging the terrestrial crust and swept by eddies. The splendid flight becomes applied navigation. My temples throb, my ears hurt; my eardrum becomes that membrane described in the natural history books: it tightens, it vibrates, it hurts. I was only a gaze, an expectation: now I have a pocket of a stomach, a bony box of a skull, a membrane of an eardrum—a whole machinery of separate and ill-fitting parts. I've closed my eyes; when I open them again, all the stars in the sky have rolled onto the earth. It's a glittering mass of gems and precious red stones, ruby fruits, topaz flowers, and diamond rivers. I haven't known such splendor and such passionate desire since childhood. All the treasures of *The Thousand and One Nights* that I dreamed of back then and that I never glimpsed—here they are. All the fair booths I didn't go into, the merry-go-rounds with wooden horses, Magic City, Luna Park—here they are. And the stage sets at the Châtelet Theater, the birthday

cakes, the crystal chandeliers lighting up the night in rooms full of music—these are given back to me, given to me. That holly branch hung with necklaces, bracelets, clusters of transparent, glossy candy that I so badly coveted one Palm Sunday—here it is. I will hang these sugar jewels around my neck, my wrists; I will crack the crystal between my teeth; I will crush the shining sugary fruit against my palate and savor a taste of cassis and pineapple on my tongue.

The plane descends; it pitches. Bound to the winds, the fog, the weight of the air, it is living a turbulent life among the elements; it belongs to nature. It descends. The strings of pearls become streets, the crystal balls are streetlamps; it is a city after all, and the very words of childhood are too impoverished to name its promises. A factory smokestack sways in the sky. I make out houses along an avenue, and I think, “I will walk down those streets.” The smokestack sways a second time; we are circling around. The woman next to me murmurs, “The engine’s making an odd noise.” We turn, leaning on one wing, and I think quickly, “I don’t want to die. Not now. I don’t want the lights to go out.” The smokestack has disappeared. The red beacons draw near, and I feel the thud of the wheels touching the runway. We were just waiting our turn; an airplane lands at La Guardia every minute.

The elements are conquered, distances annihilated, but New York has vanished. To rejoin it, you have to go through the narrow tunnel of terrestrial life. Papers are passed from hand to hand; a doctor perfunctorily examines our teeth, as if we were horses for sale. We are led into an overheated hall, and we wait. My head is heavy; I’m stifling. People had warned me, “It’s always too hot in America.” This dulling heat, then, is America; and this orange juice handed to me by a young woman with shiny hair and a practiced smile is also America. It will have to be discovered slowly; it will not let you devour it like a big piece of candy. The Christmas trees and luminous fountains are far away. I will not catch another glimpse of that festive face; it doesn’t shine for those who bear down on the land with all their human

weight. My name is called; a bureaucrat examines my fine visa made of stiff paper, decorated with red seals like a medieval charter. He nods his head. "You come from a beautiful country," he says, "but you've come to an even more beautiful one." He asks me for eight dollars. Then the customs officers rummage idly through my suitcase, and I enter the great round hall where people get bored and doze off. I'm free, and on the other side of the door, New York is waiting.

D. P. [Denise Perrier, from the French cultural services] has come to meet me; I don't know her. But off I go, borne away beside a young woman I've never seen, through a city my eyes don't yet know how to see. The car drives so fluidly, the road beneath the wheels is so smooth, that the earth seems as evanescent as air. We follow a river, we cross a metal bridge, and my neighbor says suddenly, "That's Broadway." Then, all at once, I see. I see broad, brightly lit streets where hundreds and hundreds of cars are driving, stopping, and starting again with such discipline you would think they were guided from above by some magnetic providence. The regular grid of the streets, the immovable stop signs at the perpendicular intersections, the mathematical sequence of red and green traffic lights all create such an impression of order and peace that the city seems silent. The fact is, you don't hear a single honk or exhaust backfiring, and now I understand why our American visitors are surprised by the awful screeching of brakes at our street corners. Here the cars glide by on a blanketed roadway punctuated by rising geysers of steam. It's like a silent film. The shiny cars look like they've just left the showroom, and the pavement seems as clean as the tiles of a Dutch kitchen. Light has washed away all the stains; it's a supernatural light that transfigures the asphalt, that wraps a halo around the flowers, silk dresses, candies, nylon stockings, gloves, bags, shoes, furs, and ribbons offered in the shop windows. I look avidly. I will probably never find this silence, this luxury, this peace again; I will never again see those ramparts of black lava around Central Park, those gigantic dominoes of stone and light. Tomorrow New York will be a city. But this evening is magical.

We drive around without finding a parking space. This is an obligatory rite, and I give myself over to it with a neophyte's curiosity. In the restaurant decorated with red and gold palm trees, the dinner is a meal of initiation; the martini and lobster taste of the sacred.

D. P. has booked me a room in a huge hotel at Forty-fourth Street and Eighth Avenue. She asks how long I can stay. "As long as she likes, if she behaves herself," says the manager with a big smile. This seems to be a stroke of luck; it's not that easy to find lodging. D. P. leaves me, but I don't go up to my room. I walk across Broadway. The air is soft and humid, a southern winter; after all, New York is at the same latitude as Lisbon. I walk. Broadway. Times Square. Forty-second Street. My eyes have no memory; my steps, no plan. Cut off from the past and the future, a pure presence—a presence so pure, so tenuous that it doubts itself. All the world seems in limbo. I say, "This is New York." But I don't completely believe it. No rails, no tracks—I have not traced my path on the surface of the earth. This city and Paris are not connected like two elements of the same system. Each has its own atmosphere, and the two do not coincide, they do not exist together, and I couldn't have passed from one to the other. I'm no longer in Paris, but I'm not here either. My presence is a borrowed presence. There is no place for me on these sidewalks. This strange world where I've landed by surprise was not waiting for me. It was full without me; it *is* full without me. It is a world where I am not: I grasp it in my perfect absence. This crowd I'm jostling, I'm not part of it; I feel invisible to every gaze. I am traveling incognito, like a phantom. Will I manage to reincarnate myself?

*January 26*

In the middle of the night, in the depth of sleep, a wordless voice suddenly says, "Something has happened to me." I'm still sleeping, and I don't know if it's a great happiness or a catastrophe. Something has happened to me. Perhaps I've died, as so often happens in my dreams.

Perhaps I'm going to wake up on the other side of death. As I open my eyes, I'm afraid. And then I remember: this is not quite the other-world. It's New York.

It wasn't a mirage. New York is here; everything is real. Truth bursts in the blue sky, in the soft damp air, more triumphant than the night's unreliable charms. It's nine o'clock in the morning. It's Sunday. The streets are deserted. A few neon signs are still lit. Not a pedestrian, not a car; nothing disturbs the rectilinear grid of Eighth Avenue. Cubes, prisms, parallelograms; the houses are abstract solids and surfaces; the intersection, an abstract of two volumes—its materials have no density or structure; the space itself seems to have been set in molds. I do not move; I look. I'm here, and New York will be mine. This joy is familiar. Fifteen years ago I was leaving the train station, and from the top of the monumental staircase I saw all the rooftops of Marseilles at my feet. I had a year or two to spend alone in an unknown city. I didn't move; I just looked, thinking: "This strange city is my future; it will be my past." Between these houses that have existed without me for years, for centuries, these streets were traveled by thousands of people who were not me, who are not me. But now I'm walking here. I go down Broadway; it's really me. I'm walking in streets not yet traveled by me, streets where my life has not yet been carved, streets without any scent of the past. No one here is concerned with my presence; I'm still a ghost, and I slip through the city without disturbing anything. Yet from now on my life will embrace the contour of these streets, these houses. New York will belong to me; I will belong to it.

I drink orange juice at the edge of a counter, sitting in a polished booth on one of three armchairs raised on a little dais; little by little, I take on flesh and blood, and the city grows familiar. The surfaces become facades; the solids turn into houses. On the pavement the wind stirs up dust and old papers. Beyond Washington Square, the grid begins to bend. The right angles break down; the streets are no longer numbered but have names; the lines curve and tangle togeth-



er. I'm wandering through a European city. The houses have only three or four stories and come in opaque colors somewhere between red, ochre, and black. Sheets dry on the fire escapes that zigzag against the facades. These sheets that promise sunshine, the shoeshine boys posted on the street corners, the rooftop terraces—they vaguely evoke a southern city, yet the worn red of the houses makes one think of the London fog. The fact is, this neighborhood is like nothing I've ever seen. But I know I will love it.

The landscape changes. The word "landscape" suits this city that's been deserted by men and invaded by the sky. Rising above the skyscrapers, the sky surges through the straight streets; it's too vast for the city to tame, and it overflows—it's a mountain sky. I walk between the steep cliffs at the bottom of a canyon where no sun penetrates; it's filled with a salt smell. Human history is not inscribed on these carefully calibrated buildings; they are more like prehistoric caves than the houses of Paris or Rome. In Paris, in Rome, history has permeated the bowels of the ground itself; Paris reaches down into the center of the earth. In New York, even the Battery doesn't have such deep roots. Beneath the subways, sewers, and heating pipes, the rock is virgin and inhuman. Between this rock and the open sky, Wall Street and Broadway bathe in the shadows of their giant buildings; this morning they belong to nature. The little black church with its cemetery of flat paving stones is as unexpected and touching in the middle of Broadway as a crucifix on a wild ocean beach.

The sun is so beautiful, the waters of the Hudson so green that I take the boat that brings midwestern tourists to the Statue of Liberty. But I don't get out at the little island that looks like a small fort. I just want to see a view of Battery as I've so often seen it in the movies. I do see it. In the distance, its towers seem fragile. They rest so precisely on their vertical lines that the slightest shudder would knock them down like a house of cards. When the boat draws closer, their foundations seem firmer, but the fall line remains indelibly traced. What a field day a bomber would have!

There are hundreds of restaurants in these streets, but they are all closed on Sunday. The one I find is packed. I eat hastily, rushed by the waitress. No place to rest. Nature is kinder. Within this harshness, New York becomes more human again. Pearl Street with its elevated train, Chatham Square, Chinatown, the Bowery. I am beginning to get tired. Slogans run through my head: “City of contrasts.” These alleys smelling of spices and packing paper at the foot of facades with thousands of windows—that is one contrast. I encounter another contrast with each step, and they are all different. “A vertical city,” “passionate geometries,” “thrilling geometries”—such phrases are perfect descriptions of these skyscrapers, these facades, these avenues: I see that. And I’ve often read, “New York with its cathedrals.” I could have invented the phrase—all these old clichés seem so hollow. Yet in the freshness of discovery, the words “contrasts” and “cathedrals” also come to my lips, and I’m surprised they seem so faded when the reality they capture is unchanged. People have told me something more precise: “On the Bowery on Sundays, the drunks sleep on the sidewalks.” Here is the Bowery; the drunks are sleeping on the sidewalks. This is just what the words meant, and their precision disconcerts me. How could they have seemed so empty when they are so true? It isn’t with words that I will grasp New York. I no longer think of grasping it: I will be transformed by it. Words, images, knowledge, expectations—they won’t help me at all. To pronounce them true or false makes no sense. It is not possible to confront things here; they exist in another dimension—they are simply here. And I look and look, as astonished as a blind man who has just recovered his sight.

*January 27*

If I want to decode New York, I must meet New Yorkers. There are names in my address book but no faces to match. I’ll have to talk on the telephone, in English, to people whom I don’t know and who don’t know me. Going down into the hotel lobby, I’m more intimi-

dated than if I were going to take an oral exam. This lobby stuns me with its exoticism, an unnatural exoticism. I'm the Zulu frightened by a bicycle, the peasant lost in the Paris metro. There's a newspaper and a cigar stand, a Western Union office, a hairdresser, a writing room where stenographers and typists take dictation from clients—it's at once a club, an office, a waiting room, and a large department store. I perceive around me all the conveniences of everyday life, but I don't know what to do. The slightest action poses a problem: How do I get postage for my letters? Where do I mail them? Those flutterings near the elevator, those white flashes, I almost took them for hallucinations. Behind a glass window, letters fall from the twenty-fifth floor into the depths of the basement—the mailbox. At the newspaper stand there's a machine that spits out stamps. But I'm confused by the coins. One cent, for me, seems like both one *sou* and one *centime*; five cents is then five *centimes* but also five *sous* (that is, twenty-five *centimes*). For ten minutes I try in vain to get a telephone line; all the machines reject the nickel I stubbornly keep sliding into the slot meant for quarters. I remain sitting in one of the booths, worn out. I want to give up: I hate this malicious instrument. But in the end I can't just stay wrapped in my solitude. I ask the Western Union employee for help. This time someone answers. The faceless voice vibrates at the other end of the line: I have to talk. They weren't expecting me, and I have nothing to offer. I simply say, "I'm here." I have no face either; I'm just a name bandied about by mutual friends. I say again, "I'd very much like to see you." It's not even true, and they know it; it isn't them I want to see, because I don't know them. But the voices are almost friendly, natural. This naturalness already comforts me, as a kind of friendship. After three calls, though, I close my address book, flushed.

I go to the hairdresser; I feel less uprooted. In every city I've known, these places are much alike—the same odor, the same metal dryers. The combs, the cotton balls, the mirrors have no personality. Surrendering to the hands massaging my skull, I'm no longer a ghost:

there's a real meeting between me and these hands—it's really me turning into flesh and blood. But even this moment isn't entirely routine. For example, I notice that I don't have to hand the hairpins one by one to the girl doing my hair: they're attached to a magnet she wears around her wrist, and a magnet removes them when my hair is dry. This little trick amazes me.

Everything amazes me, both the unexpected sights and those I've anticipated. I didn't know that in front of the apartment buildings in the elegant neighborhoods there would be a greenish canvas canopy marked with a big number and extending onto the sidewalk, announcing some kind of wedding. A porter stands on the threshold, so every building really looks like a hotel or a bar. The entry, too, guarded by uniformed doormen, resembles the entrance hall of a palace. The elevator is staffed by an employee: it's difficult to receive clandestine visits. On the other hand, in movies I have often seen these buildings without any concierge, similar to provincial apartments in France. You step inside a glass door and find a series of bells corresponding to each tenant; each person has a mailbox. You ring the bell, and a second glass door opens. I also recognize the broad, flat doorbells I've seen in films. They make a more muffled sound than French bells do. What disconcerts me is that those movie sets that I'd never really believed in are suddenly real.

So many small surprises give the first few days a particular grace—I could never be bored. This business lunch in a restaurant on Fortieth Street is perfectly dreary. With its carpets, its mirrors, and its polished surfaces, this elegant place looks like the tearoom in a big department store, and of course it's overheated. But in my martini, in the tomato juice, I learn the taste of America. This meal is another communion.

This grace has its price. The exoticism that transfigures each of my moments also leads me into traps. It's a beautiful sunny day, and I want to walk along the East River. But the "Drive," that broad elevated causeway spanning the river, is reserved for cars. I try to cheat,

and I walk along, glued to the wall. But it's difficult to cheat in America. The gears are precise; they serve man, provided he's quietly compliant. The cars hurtling along at sixty miles per hour over this sort of highway come dangerously close to me. There's a square near the water where people are strolling, but it seems impossible to reach them. I muster my courage and cross to the center line separating the two lanes of traffic, but I have to stand there a long time, planted like a traffic light, waiting for a brief lull so that I can cross over. I still have to jump over a metal railing to get to safety. Under my winter coat, which is too heavy for this sun, I'm more exhausted than if I'd climbed a mountain. A few moments later, I find out that there are pedestrian passageways under the Drive and that it's also spanned by bridges.

The river smells of salt and spices. Men are sitting on benches in the sun: tramps and blacks. Children on roller skates hurl themselves over the asphalt, jostling each other, shouting. Low-cost housing is under construction along the Drive; these vast buildings, which narrow as they rise, are ugly. But beyond them I glimpse the city's high towers, and across the river I see Brooklyn. I sit on a bench looking at Brooklyn amid the noise of roller skates, and I feel quite happy. Brooklyn exists, as does Manhattan with its skyscrapers and all of America on the horizon. As for me, I no longer exist. There. I understand what I've come to find—this plenitude that we rarely feel except in childhood or in early youth, when we're utterly absorbed by something outside ourselves. To be sure, on other trips I've tasted this joy, this certitude, but it was fleeting. In Greece, in Italy, in Spain, in Africa, I still felt that Paris was the heart of the world. I'd never completely left Paris; I remained inside myself.

Paris has lost its hegemony. I've landed not only in a foreign country but in another world—an autonomous, separate world. I touch this world; it's here. It will be given to me. But it's not even to me that it will be given; its existence is too dazzlingly clear for me to hope to catch it in my net. The revelation will take place somewhere

beyond the limits of my own existence. In a flash I'm freed from the cares of that tedious enterprise I call my life. I'm just the charmed consciousness through which the sovereign Object will reveal itself.

I walk for a long time. When I reach the bridge, the sun is all red. The black trellis of the steel bridge bars the flaming sky. Through this iron gridwork I can glimpse the high square towers of the Battery. The bridge's horizontal thrust and the skyscrapers' vertical lift seem amplified. The light is a glorious reward for their audacity.

I have a rendezvous at six o'clock at the Plaza Hotel on Fifty-ninth Street. I climb the stairs of the elevated railway. This railway is touching, like a memory; it's scarcely bigger than a provincial miniature railway. The walls are wooden; it seems like a country station. The gate is also made of wood, but it turns automatically—no employee. To go through, all you need is a nickel, the magic coin that also activates telephones and opens the doors of toilets, which are modestly called "restrooms." We roll along above the Bowery at second-story level. The stations whiz by: we're already at Fourteenth Street, then Thirty-fifth, Forty-second. I'm waiting for Fifty-ninth, but we rush past—Seventieth, Eightieth—we're not stopping anymore. Below us, all the streetlamps are lit. Here is the nocturnal celebration I glimpsed from up in the sky: movie houses, drugstores, wooden horses. I'm transported through a wondrous amusement park, and this little elevated train is itself a fairground attraction. Will it ever stop? New York is so big . . .

I've gotten on an express train. At the first station I get off and take a "local." I wait for a long while in the Plaza's scented, overheated lobby. It's the same setting as in the restaurant this morning: too many mirrors, too many carpets, drapes, polished surfaces. I wait an amazingly long time, and suddenly I realize that I'm at the Savoy-Plaza; my rendezvous is across the street. Tired, confused, dazed after so many discoveries and mistakes, I sit down at the Plaza bar. Fortunately, everyone's waited for me. The martini revives me. The big, dark, oak-

paneled room is overheated and overcrowded. I look at people. The women surprise me. In their carefully coifed, perfectly waved hair they wear whole flower beds, aviaries. Most of the coats are mink; the intricately draped dresses are sewn with bright spangles and decorated with heavy, unimaginative costume jewelry. All these women are wearing open-toed shoes with very high heels. I'm ashamed of my Swiss shoes with the crepe soles I was so proud of. In the street, on this winter day, I haven't seen one woman with flat shoes. None have had the free and sporty look I attribute to American women. All are dressed in silk, not wool; they are covered with feathers, violets, flowers, and flounces. There's too much finery, too many mirrors and drapes; the food has too many sauces and syrups; everywhere, there's too much heat. Superabundance, too, is a curse.

Yesterday I had dinner at D. P.'s with some French people. This evening I'm having dinner at the home of more French people. And after dinner, B. C., a Frenchwoman, is going to take me to some bars. When I'm with French people, I sense the same disappointment I felt when I was with my parents during my childhood, that nothing was completely real. There was a glass wall between things and me, so all birds seemed to be in birdcages, all fish seemed to swim in aquariums, all chimpanzees seemed stuffed—and I so dearly wanted to see the world truly, without restraints . . . I don't like the taste of whiskey; I only like these glass sticks you stir it with. Yet until three o'clock in the morning, I drink scotch docilely because scotch is one of the keys to America. I want to break through the glass wall.

*January 28*

I have a lecture to prepare. I sit down at one of the desks in the "writing room" amid the murmur of voices dictating reports to stenographers and the clacking of typewriters. It's quiet and subdued; you'd think you were at Bon Marché [a popular Parisian department store]! I decide to sit in one of the bars around Central Park. I don't much