

the dillydoun review

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From Blue Hair to the Blue Line: Becoming an Urban Character

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, my family pilgrimages from the northern suburbs to New York City were always memorable. While I'm sure my parents hoped my key takeaways would be those related to the museums, performances, and other cultural places and events they took me to, those particular memories are nothing but distant. What did get imprinted on my brain were the encounters that inspired a lifelong pastime of people watching and a lifelong goal of being a version of "the lady with blue hair."

On any given trip of those days, following an afternoon stuffed with sidewalk-cart pretzels, hot dogs, and other circus-related treats, my parents and I would walk across town from Madison Square Garden back to Grand Central Station to catch a train home. These were not the bright, shiny, tourist-filled midtown streets of modern times. In the 70s and 80s in New York, phone booths doubled as urinals and the solution to being mugged was to carry extra "mugger money" to protect ones' actual wallet. People walked quickly, avoided eye contact, and uttered the phrase "get the hell outta here" as commonly as "hello."

At a time when I was still young enough to meander the city streets riding on my father's shoulders, I was transformed from a pip-squeak likely to be trampled by crowds into a tiny social observer taking it all in. It was during one of these early trips that I surveyed the river of people flowing in both directions down the avenue and saw the woman who would rock my world – the lady with blue hair.

Words escaped me and I grabbed my father's head. I got my mother's attention and pointed out into the crowd.

"It's not nice to point," my mother corrected.

"I see who she's looking at," my father interjected. "The punk with the blue hair!"

Up until this point in my homogenous Italian-American world, the only wild dye job and fashions I'd seen in person were those of my grandmother. A frugal, old, Italian woman, she would save money by using only half a box of expired hair dye, which would result in a hair color that vacillated between Mountain Dew and split pea soup. She also wore handmade culottes that never quite overlapped with the top of her black knee-highs leaving everyone perplexed as to why she just didn't make full length pants.

This punk woman's blue hair was offset by layers of black clothing seemingly held together with safety pins and patches. As my father indulged my inquisitiveness and moved in so I could get a closer look, I saw that she wore combat boots nearly up to her knees covering tights that were ripped and slashed with intention. She walked with purpose weaving through the crowd like she owned the street.

In the weeks and months that followed I told everyone I encountered about the amazing blue haired lady I'd seen. While my mother reassured me that the only way I'd ever have blue hair in my lifetime was over her dead body, I knew then and there that I wanted to grow up and embody that woman.

Over the years, the blue haired lady wasn't the only female stranger in the city that I was infatuated with. My mother and I would often go into the city to meet her friends and relatives for lunch. I was never the type of kid who needed crayons and a coloring book to be kept amused or quiet when sitting in a restaurant or cafe. Instead I would instantly tune out their gossip and conversations to take in my surroundings.

"She likes all the floozies and weirdos," my nana would say. And she was right.

I was most enamored by the women least like my mom and those I encountered in my small everyday life. I wanted to know more about the women with the overdone makeup, biggest sunglasses, most unusual haircuts, flashiest outfits, and the highest heels.

In addition to how these *exotic* city-ladies looked, I was fascinated by how they must live. I would stare out into the tiny lit up boxes of apartment buildings from the commuter train window, hoping to glimpse silhouettes of people going about their daily lives or trying to see how their places were decorated.

My Godmother lived in Manhattan's west village in the early 80s, in an apartment that still captures my imagination. From what I can remember, the whole apartment was probably no bigger than my childhood bedroom at the time. Her kitchen was really just an indentation in a wall, maybe a few feet wide. While a single person could stand in the center of it, only one appliance could be opened at a time without hitting a wall or another appliance. It was like a life-size dollhouse to me and I wanted to jump in and play.

During another memorable visit I witnessed a well-dressed woman seemingly hurl herself into traffic with an outstretched arm and four manicured fingers in the air. She landed her little hop on a perfectly polished patent leather pump as a taxi pulled up next to her.

"What is she doing?!" I asked my mother bewildered.

"She's hailing a cab," my mother replied, slightly fearful that she was raising a little girl who didn't understand how the world worked.

For weeks to come at family gatherings, play dates, and random trips to the supermarket I could be seen hopping on one foot flailing my arm.

"Is she practicing a dance?" someone would politely ask.

“No,” my mother would sigh, “she’s pretending to hail a cab.”

As I grew older my infatuation with the women of the city continued. In the fourth grade, despite having a mother who could sew any Halloween costume that one could imagine, I decided to go as a rich city lady. Basically I wanted to build a costume around my one opportunity to wear a pair of red Lee Press-Nails in public. I wore an excessive amount of costume jewelry, a fake fur jacket, lots of makeup, and carried my candy in an oversized gaudy handbag. When people opened their doors and asked us all about our costumes, I proudly stated “I’m a rich lady from Manhattan,” before hurling myself and a bag full of candy off their porch pretending to hail a cab.

As I grew into a young adult, the city too transitioned and became a slightly kinder and gentler version of itself. I moved to Queens after college and tried on multiple physical personas. My college grunge style morphed into tank tops and vintage clothes accessorized with choker necklaces and dark lipstick, in deep contrast to my business casual workwear that consisted of anything on sale that fit off the rack from Petite Sophisticate. My social life involved going to downtown music institutions, swing dancing and going to Ska shows to support friends’ bands. My evenings were spent hanging out in a concrete park in Sunnyside, Queens with my dog and other neighborhood dog owners who would soon become as much of my family as those I was actually related to.

Contrary to my childhood dreams of city-living adulthood, I could not afford to hail cabs in patent leather pumps, or live in a high rise in Manhattan. However, even though my vision of being a city-living lady hadn’t materialized in the way I’d envisioned as a child, in many ways it had become even better and I’d figured out who I really was among the streets of the concrete jungle. Ultimately my true self embodied a sense of style that landed somewhere between Lucille Ball and Cyndi Lauper in comfortable shoes, and my true voice was tinged with sarcasm and struggled not to mispronounce the word “ask” as “axe.”

After a decade in Queens, my husband and I would ultimately leave New York City and try our hand living in Burlington, Vermont. While we gave it a good shot, it was not the best fit for us. My heart ached for urban adventure and the type of people watching and interaction that could only be had in a major metropolis. So with little more than a visit or two under our belt, we made a leap and decided to plant roots in our current home base of Chicago.

Exploring a new city with fresh eyes brought child-like wonder and reignited a spark of urban curiosity within me. One evening while riding the express bus from downtown to my North Side neighborhood, akin to my train rides decades before, I found myself staring up into the lit up windows of the apartment high-rises on Lakeshore Drive looking for signs of life and peering into the little dioramas of city living.

My husband nudged me out of my mental trance to make me aware of the young girl sitting across from us staring at me intensely. At the time I was wearing a brightly patterned dress with a full 1950s circle skirt, bejeweled cat eye glasses, a large hair flower, and bright red lipstick. I instinctively smiled at her and watched as she cracked a smile and looked up at her mother with a fascinated giggle. Even though reactions like this from little girls had increasingly become a common phenomenon for me, it still took a minute to register.

“I’ve become the lady with blue hair!” I loudly whispered to my husband as I nudged him hard. “I’m the weirdo – floozy! It’s happened!”

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“I’m not literally the blue haired lady, but I’m the eccentric city lady that young girls take note of. I’m someone’s inspiration! Without even realizing it I’ve become who I always wanted to be!”

I grabbed his hand, sat back in my seat on the bus and continued my journey northward. As I looked out into apartment buildings thinking about the lives being lived in those boxes in the sky I realized that anything was possible in a city, even having an eccentric little box of a life of my very own.

Jen LiMarzi is a senior medical writer by day, humor writer by nature. A New York native who now resides in Chicago, Jen’s published humor writing and ongoing artistic pursuits can be explored at www.JenLiMarzi.com (<http://www.jenlimarzi.com/>).

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