



The SleepWorker

CYRILLE MARTINEZ

TRANSLATED BY JOSEPH PATRICK STENCIL

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The name New York New York comes from New which means new, newish, novel, from York which means York, and from New York which means New York.

For some time now, the city of New York New York has been home to a growing number of writers, many of whom are well known. Recent studies tend to suggest that these writers owe a part of their fame to the fact that they live in New York New York. By virtue of the fact that living in New York New York would be an asset for anyone aspiring to make a name for himself in literature.

It must be noted that writers from New York New York may or may not write books that take place in New York New York, that talk or don't talk about New York New York, but, in any case, seem to gain from having been written in New York New York. In return, the writers of New York New York don't write so much about New York New York as much as in favour of New York New York, or for the sake of New York New York.

As brief as they might be, the biographies of local writers never forget to mention this: 'lives and works in New York New York.'

As for foreign writers, about whom a word must be said: whatever their country, region, town, rare are those who have never mentioned the city. The name New York New York has this quality of being adaptable to any language, any dialect, any accent. It's been the object of translation in just about all of the living languages.

In any case, New York New York was the first city to propose a Writers' Quarter.

Not simply a quarter of café backrooms squatted in by writers. Not a quarter where publishers have set up and invited writers to come visit. No, the expression *Writers' Quarter* was to be taken literally. In New York New York, there was a quarter where the entire population was made up of writers.

All it took was a single writer to one day decide to physically establish himself there and to set his bestselling novels there for the other New York New York writers to say to themselves, That's where it's all happening now, let's go settle in this cheap neighbourhood that's good for writing, where it's possible to be a bestselling author.

So it was advertised that New York New York offered a residential quarter particularly welcoming to writers. The news spread in writers' circles, and gradually little niches started to appear, writers' niches here and there, scattered over a mixed area - novelistic moments and poetic brilliance interspersed between zones of literary desert.

Of course, they were only minuscule niches at first. If a writer happened upon a colleague while walking on the street or doing his shopping, the encounters were still quite rare. They'd say it was due to good luck when the two writers liked each other, or bad luck when they couldn't stand each other.

And, to say the least, writers flocked, from the verb *to flock*.

Writers flocked there to the extent that non-writers very quickly began to no longer feel at home. The new neighbours were hardly willing to say hello when they'd run into each other in the communal parts of buildings. Let's be clear, if writers came to live in the Quarter, it was to be among writers, not to talk about the weather with the first non-writer who came along. Now, to try and engage in conversation with the writers, the non-writers of the Quarter couldn't find anything better to talk about than the weather. To which the writers didn't respond, or else they did so monosyllabically, grumbling, in order to make their interlocutors understand that these meteorological questions were of no interest to the literature of today.

Writers and non-writers of the Quarter didn't have much to say to each other, only Hello, Good evening, maybe Thank you when one held open the door to facilitate the passage of the other. Most of the time, the two parties communicated with each other via a simple batting of eyelashes signifying It's fine, Don't worry, I get you, asshole.

In the name of a gathering of literary forces, or in other words, in the name of creating a hub of literary excellence, writers benefited from various minor perks: special menus in restaurants, buy-one-get-one-free beers, special rates at the movies, line cutting in theatres, being served first in stores, more services in the library, discounts at bookstores and record stores, reserved parking spots, priority in getting a spot at daycare, a free man with every rental of a woman, tolerance regarding public intoxication, a blind eye turned to the possession and use of drugs.

At stores, overcharging non-writers compensated for the lack of earnings. Non-writers paid more so that writers paid

less. Unheard of, thought the non-writers, who came together in associations to complain about this preferential treatment granted to literary workers. In the end, the verdict came down that, as a hub of literary excellence, the Writers' Quarter of New York New York should follow its own rules, exceptional rules, rules that no one was supposed to ignore. In other words, submit to them or get the hell out.

Disgusted, the non-writers gave up the fight. Non-writer tenants terminated their leases, which were turned into writers' leases. Non-writer owners sold their apartments to writers eager to invest their royalties in real estate. The non-writers exiled themselves to neighbourhoods where life would be sweeter, where they'd be taxed less, neighbourhoods where they could attend to occupations other than literary ones, where they could go on about the return of the good weather if they so fancied without it getting them blacklisted. And for god's sake, they wouldn't be bothered with writers and literature ever the fuck again.

Once the quarter was emptied of its last non-writers, a zoning regulation was instituted, with fiscal incentives to rent to confirmed writers.

Real estate agencies specializing in writers' residences put new criteria into place for access to housing. A request could be submitted under the conditions that the writer could prove publication of a book by a legitimate publisher, with a print run of more than 2,000 copies, and that his/her editor and/or agent be the joint guarantor(s).

Anyone who had never published a book had to give up living in the quarter. Anyone wishing to make a name for himself in literature had to get an address there. At first glance, it could seem expensive, real estate agents admitted

during their showings, but you'll see, it'll be worth it in the end. What you pay today, you'll get back tomorrow, first in symbolic capital, then in royalties.

The only non-writers of the quarter were clerks working in stores for writers, bankers in banks for writers, real estate agents working in agencies for writers, and all the providers of services appreciated by writers: home deliveries, technical assistance, housekeepers in maids' costumes (or the nudist version), escort services and other commodities. Which goes to show the number of industries that, indirectly, fed on literature.

Mornings and afternoons, the writers wrote in their writers' offices. At noon, they went out to lunch in little writers' restaurants where they could choose from express lunch menus. In the evening, they met for a drink, or, let's say, a drink to start off with, a drink that led to many others, and that's how they got started on a bar crawl of all the coolest places. Later, those who hadn't crashed yet made up noisy tables at semi-gourmet restaurants, before ending up at nightclubs where only the well-known writers could get in. Finally, the most resilient finished off in extremely private clubs with dim lighting and they left feeling relieved or just plain shitty.

Saturday mornings, the writers bumped into each other at stores specializing in household supplies and the nutrition of the literary class, where they'd taken up the habit of doing their weekly shopping. Saturday afternoons were dedicated to cultural activities, so the writers went to museums, galleries or the movies before sending out invitations to go over to each other's houses, with the chance to devote themselves to one of those drinking binges that lasted until

they were exhausted, out of words or sick as dogs. Sunday, if it was nice out, the writers organized giant picnics in the park. If it was lousy out, they preferred to hang around at home, lazy blobs that could stretch a sweatsuit out of shape, not moving from the sofa except to go pee, alternating naps and TV, too lazy to wash - it's not pleasant to see a writer the morning after a party in winter. Luckily, spring and summer were livelier. The writers rented buses and went to the country or the seaside for a few relaxing days, extended weekends that they called 'conferences,' 'seminars' or 'study days.'

Outside of this perimeter, New York New York didn't account for any more writers. At least, not officially.

Originally, it was planned that the Writers' Quarter would ignore the question of genres in literature. Among the writers, everything could be found from novelists to poets and playwrights, as well as non-novelists, non-poets and non-playwrights. But in fact, the applications of some New York New York poets meeting the criteria for publication and circulation imposed by the real estate agencies were systematically rejected. Apartments were granted to better applications than theirs: novelists with over 5,000 copies in print, novelists with over 8,000 copies in print and novelists with more than 10,000 copies in print. No poet managed to live in the Writers' Quarter, not even by sharing an apartment with a novelist friend. Same for playwrights and for non-poets-non-novelists-non-playwrights.

Poets and non-novelists were reduced to living scattered around the rest of the city, among the non-writers. This resulted in making them difficult to locate and contributed to their lack of visibility in the literary sphere. Why would anyone waste their fucking time combing through the area, just to take inventory of a few dozen or hundred non-novelists? A Writers' Quarter had been created, and from there things were simple: anyone who had an address there was a writer, anyone who didn't have one was a non-writer.

Some promoters, sensitive to contemporary poetry's lack of visibility, offered to remedy the situation by establishing a Poets' Quarter. They wrote up a proposal, put it forward to the city, which responded Why not? and appointed an independent evaluation committee composed

of two writers, a sound poet, a critic, a journalist-critic, a teacher-critic, a professor-writer, a bookseller, a library curator, a lexicographer, a reviewer and a director of cultural development. Under the presidency of a highly renowned poet, the commission examined the proposal and at the end of six months issued an expert report, which came down to the following:

Aside from the development of a housing-residence park intended for poets whose professionalism has already been proven via publication by legitimate publishers, we don't really understand how the creation of a Poets' Quarter will promote an active symbiosis between the inhabitants and literary creation while allowing for the authors' own writing projects. Public meet-and-greets with the author and his books? Literary impact of proposed actions? Territorial anchorage? Insurance of revenues in the medium term? All these elements were overlooked. If you add that the subsidies allocated to journals are very insufficient relative to their importance in the poetic field, we are permitted to doubt that this proposal has correctly taken the measure of poets' needs and expectations. We can ask ourselves if, in place of encouraging a new dynamic, such a quarter risks isolating poetry in a space that no one will enter and that no one will leave. A ghetto, no thank you.

We hear you, retorted the promoters (offended) – if that's how you see it then too bad, we'll cancel the project. But don't you go complaining later. You'll be the first to blame when you go broke.

As of that day, the poets ceased to be considered a category of writers. They were poets, period. They were representatives of a distant era, prestigious all right, but it was

obvious they had a hard time adjusting to today's realities. Poets were well liked, but that was it. It wasn't unpleasant to have to use the notions of poetry and poetics from time to time: that being said, it was possible to use them and still do without poets and their books with fewer than 2,000 readers - after all, a novel can be poetic, and a novelist possesses a poet's soul as well. In New York New York, like elsewhere, there were enough great dead poets to not have to give a shit about the few living ones.

People began to speak about poets in the past tense. It was said they had disappeared. Having reached the end of a race, they had become extinct. They'd lived their lives, they'd had their history, a beautiful and tragic history, subject matter perfect for a novel. Now it was better for them to just vanish, leave the prestige of past poetry intact and spread its legend to future generations, rather than endure long and sad death throes. Better to die a poet than to live as a writer with fewer than 2,000 copies in print.

And New York New York could present itself as a poet-less land, a great novelists' city.

Less than a year after its creation, the Writers' Quarter had become *the* hip place to be: the place in New York New York where it was cool to be seen hanging out, where it was desirable to have an address.

Any author of a bestselling novel had a duty to live in the quarter. Anyone wishing to find housing in the quarter was required to write a novel and get it published. Novel production felt the effects. Tons of new novels were printed. They arrived en masse at bookstores, which no longer had room for a Poetry or Non-Novel Non-Poetry section. The Newly Released Novels section took up the entire sales floor.

It was the time of the novelists, the young novelists. They always had something to say. Always a comment in store, a witty remark ready to let fly. Guiding them was their need to express themselves and make that known. They said they had a special thing called World Vision. Which often led them to have visions, and always concerned the world in its globality. Each new World Vision was tested out in conversations at bars, in restaurants, in public debates, in local media. And, depending on the reception that each received, they'd decide whether or not to write a book about it. A film or at least a screenplay? They would rely on their insight to formulate a personal and sensitive vision of the world in which we are condemned to live, you see, so we might as well accept it and just read the novels of today. In private, they gladly opened up about their pride at having succeeded before turning thirty. It was a habit of theirs to intransitively use the verb *succeed*. They'd

managed to turn a manuscript into a bestseller, so, in a nutshell, they'd succeeded (unlike others). Obsessed with this powerful sense of accomplishment, they'd acquired the certainty that they embodied the literature of their time. Their critic friends recognized in them a talent for capturing the vibe of their era, a capacity to describe transformations of the present and envision paths for the future. The first book was a youthful impulse, the second a transition toward the third, which was the work of a maturity that following works strove to consolidate into one sensitive and singular oeuvre.

Under the pretext that they were the most important voices of their generation (one only needed to see how much they were both quoted and solicited), they claimed and secured housing in the quarter. Each time an old novelist died, his apartment was taken over by a new best-selling novelist. By virtue of which, the Writers' Quarter became theirs.

Since novel production didn't stop growing in New York New York, since everyone wanted to do the young-novelist thing as new novelists popped up every day, and since each new novelist exercised his right to housing, the Writers' Quarter became saturated. There wasn't a single apartment available, not even a cellar or a tiny room to sublet. Even if you were an established writer (with more than ten books officially published, including paperback editions, translations, adaptations, reviews, quotations, exegeses, congresses, conferences, symposiums, prizes, grants, residencies), you would be told: sorry, we don't have anything at this time, the demand exceeds the supply, too much literature, not enough housing.

Rents skyrocketed. The Writers' Quarter became completely unaffordable, among the most expensive neighbourhoods in the city. It got to the point that living in the Writers' Quarter became inaccessible to the majority of them. The writers who'd been there from the beginning, its founders in a way, the first writers to inhabit the quarter, were also the first to leave it. They sold their writers' lofts to guys from television, to actors, journalists and other finance types who had moved on to writing novels. After settling down in the Writers' Quarter, guys from television, actors, finance types and journalists persisted in the writing and publishing of books. They said: We're the writers now. We know the formula for a bestseller. It was a smash hit in bookstores.