

One and A Half Hearts

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I did most of my growing up, at least technically, in Baltimore. As most Jewish youngsters of my generation, children of immigrants, I was taught that the Jews were a people in exile. And while I knew better, the place where I imagined myself to be in exile from was not, in fact, the Holy Land. It was New York City.

New York was the city where the action was: Macy's basement with its demonstrations of magical vegetable peelers and tomato slicers, and the front window of the first car of the subway trains, where you could stand as the train hurtled forward and pretend you were the Motorman, and, later, Broadway and the debates in Union Square and Ratner's and infinite secrets and infinite revelations, so unlike my all-too-knowable Baltimore.

And New York was more: It was where the Jews were. And more still: It was where the Jewish intellectuals were, even the kids my age, the ones who went to Stuyvesant and Music and Art and the Bronx High School of Science and Fieldston, the ones who always seemed to be and very likely were ever so much more sophisticated than the rest of us, an observation confirmed later still by the emergence of the CCNY generation as the undoubted heroes of American high culture.

This is not about nostalgia. It is about establishing my credentials as someone who has lived, vicariously, in New York all his life. Indeed, the rather embarrassing truth is that I continue, thanks to the New York Times and reasonably frequent visits, to know more about New York than I do about Boston, where I have lived these past three decades and some.

To have lived so long in New York, even if only vicariously, is to share the sorrow at New York's decline, the all too well-known elements of which I refrain from here recapitulating. (When I was 16, I walked my date home one night from a Knicks game at the old Madison Square

Garden. She lived in Williamsburg, and it never occurred to us to be afraid.)

Those who live and/or work in New York will draw such balance sheets as they choose or must, weighing New York's excitements against its fears and fissures. And they will assign responsibility for its decline where they will, based on their experiences, their prejudices, their analyses. There is much blame to go around, and many--very many--who share it.

But I do not, with one exception, think it fair to head the list of the blameworthy with New York's recent mayors or its incumbent mayor. This world class city has had precinct class mayors ever since LaGuardia. Abe Beame? Paul O'Dwyer? Robert Wagner? Who remembers their incumbency? Small men, all, too small for either praise or blame. In the annals of the city, nonentities.

(The only exception to that dismal list is Ed Koch, the person who stands as continuing evidence that you don't have to be a sheigetz to be a sheigetz, the mayor who thought loud was good and louder better, whose philosophy of governing began with grudge, passed through abrasion and ended with division, a man whose behavior suggested that his motto was "la ville est moi." Boorishness masquerading as honesty.)

Now comes David Dinkins, another undistinguished mayor, and asks to be re-elected. It is a source of wonder to me to read the agitated letters that readers of this newspaper have written in response to its endorsement of Mr. Dinkins. Nothing he has done or failed to do--including his Crown Heights lapse--seems to me to warrant such passion. On balance, he's been no worse than the others, perhaps even a tad better.

And against Mr. Dinkins there comes Rudolph Guiliani, a man who abused with strong-arm tactics the only public office he has held and whose "crowd" includes entirely too many small-minded and reactionary would-be vigilantes who fantasize that "getting tough on crime," whatever that may mean, will restore New York's days as of old.

New York has often presented its voters with the unpleasant predicament of having to vote

heartily against rather than being able to vote enthusiastically for. This election's not different. The very last thing in the world that New York needs at this point in its history is a mayor who will redecorate Gracie Mansion with the furniture of his own, and the city's, mean-spiritedness. Too harsh? But what else does Guiliani bring with him?

The thing this vicarious New Yorker fears the most is a hot-tempered mayor. There is something to be said for preferring a limping and tardy fireman to an arsonist. If the choice were between phlegmatic and choleric, I'd pick phlegmatic every time. Nor is it fair to say of David Dinkins that "phlegmatic" summarizes him. There is something to be said for his kindness and concern in a city that is so often so harsh and so indifferent.

Maybe there's a place where politics attracts the best and the brightest, where we can vote not only our fears but also our hopes. But this will not be the first time nor, most likely, the last, when a half-hearted vote "for" plus a whole-hearted vote "against" is reason aplenty to pull the lever soundly. In this election, where one candidate's not bad and the other's not good, the choice, to this vicarious New Yorker, seems clear.