

WHEN NEW YORK TURNS GOLD

AUTUMN IN NEW YORK CITY

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FOREWORD

There is a season in New York that the city does not advertise.

It does not need to. It arrives on its own terms, in its own time, and announces itself not with fanfare but with a single yellow leaf on a sidewalk that was grey the day before, a change in the quality of the morning air, a shift in the angle of the light so subtle and so complete that you cannot say exactly when it happened, only that yesterday the city was one thing and today it is another.

Autumn in New York is not a gentle season. This is not a city that does anything gently. When October arrives and the trees along the avenues begin to turn and the sun drops to the angle that turns every glass tower into a mirror of fire and the golden hour stretches across the Hudson and fills the long east-west streets with a light so warm it seems to come from inside the city rather than above it, the effect is not quiet. It is overwhelming. It is excessive in the particular way that New York is always excessive, unable to do anything by half, committed entirely to whatever it is doing at any given moment and doing it more than anywhere else and better than anyone asked for.

But underneath the spectacle, underneath the famous views and the burning skyline and the park going gold from the outside in, there is something quieter happening in October. Something that belongs not to the city as icon but to the city as place. A leaf pressed flat into the gap between two cobblestones in SoHo. The sound of the Mall in Central Park at eight in the morning, the soft percussion of things releasing and falling. The particular warmth of a bar window on a cold East Village Tuesday. The man on Park Avenue watching a single leaf fall and not moving to catch it. These are the moments that do not appear in the establishing shots. These are the moments that belong to the people who are here, walking slowly, paying attention, present enough to receive what the city is quietly offering alongside everything it loudly insists upon.

This book moves through both versions of that October city. The spectacular and the intimate. The golden hour and the quiet morning. The famous skyline and the wet cobblestone. It is a record of a season that lasts only a few weeks every year and gives everything it has for every day of those weeks, and then withdraws overnight without ceremony, leaving the city to its winter and the photographs to carry the light forward.

New York in autumn does not ask to be remembered. It does not need to. It simply is, briefly and completely and without apology, the most beautiful version of itself. These pages are proof that it happened.

The rest is light.

F.K.

CHAPTER 1

ARRIVAL





Nobody warns you about October.

You can live in New York for years. You can survive its summers that turn the sidewalks into griddles and the subways into ovens, endure its winters that turn the avenues into wind tunnels and the parks into monochrome battlegrounds of grey slush and bare branches. You can learn the particular rhythm of its endless noise, the way the garbage trucks come at 3 AM, the way the upstairs neighbor's footsteps are as familiar as your own heartbeat, the way the city always sounds like it is arriving at something urgent. And you can still be caught completely off guard by the morning in early October when everything changes.

It happens overnight, literally, and without ceremony. You go to sleep in one city and wake up in another. The air through the cracked bedroom window is different. Cooler at the edges, carrying something sweet and faintly smoky, the kind of smell that exists nowhere else on earth and yet feels immediately and deeply familiar. Wet leaves on warm pavement. Roasted chestnuts drifting from a cart somewhere two blocks away. The East River sending its cold breath through the avenues like a letter delivered early, before you were ready to read it. It is the first week of October and the first light is already raking across the skyline at an angle that makes the glass towers glow like they are waking up from the same dream you just left behind.

You stand on the sidewalk in front of your building with your coffee, black, from the bodega on the corner that opens at 5:30 every morning without fail, and you look up. The sky above Midtown is a shade of blue that summer never managed. Sharp and deep and completely without haze, the kind of blue that makes you want to photograph it even though you know no camera will ever get it quite right. The light hits the glass towers at an angle the summer sun was always too high to reach, and every window on the eastern face of every skyscraper looks like it has been set gently and deliberately on fire. The city is the same city it was yesterday. The scaffolding is still up on the building across the street, wrapped in green netting that flaps in the morning breeze. The subway is still running late. The bodega on the corner still has the same handwritten sign it has had since April. And yet something has fundamentally shifted, the way a piece of music shifts when it moves from one key to another. All the same notes, rearranged into something that feels like a completely different song.





Somewhere above you, in the ginkgo tree that has been standing on this sidewalk since before the building behind it existed, the first yellow leaves have appeared overnight. Just a few. Just enough to announce what is coming. The ginkgoes always go first in New York, their fan-shaped leaves turning brilliant yellow in the first week of October, carpeting the sidewalks in a color so pure it is almost fluorescent. You notice them and feel, against all reasonable expectation, grateful. A woman in a wool coat walks her terrier past the tree, and the dog sniffs at the fallen leaves with intense concentration, as if trying to decode a message left there specifically for him. She smiles at you, a real smile, not the polite head-nod of summer commuters, and says "First ones. Can you believe it?" You shake your head. Because you cannot.

This is how autumn arrives in New York. Not with fanfare, because the city is too proud for that. Not with a gradual fading in, because the city is too impatient for that either. It arrives the way all the best things in New York arrive: suddenly, completely, on its own schedule, asking for nothing but your full attention.

Walk east toward the river on a Tuesday morning, just after sunrise, and the first real signs of the season hit you block by block. On 42nd Street, the sycamores along the United Nations plaza have started to drop their leaves, mottled yellow and brown, spiraling down onto the sidewalk where the wind arranges them into temporary patterns before rearranging them again. A delivery rider on an e-bike weaves through the drifts without noticing, kicking up a small private flurry behind him. At the overpass above FDR Drive, the maples are still mostly green but edged at every margin with red, the color advancing from the veins outward like a slow and patient fire. The river itself is visible through the chain-link fence, grey-green and moving fast, reflecting the low morning sun in sharp fractured lines that shift and reassemble every second. A jogger pauses at the railing, breathing hard, her face flushed from the cold. She looks across at Brooklyn, then back at Manhattan, as if confirming the city is still there and still worth the effort.





Turn south into the heart of Midtown and the sidewalks tell their own layered story. On Park Avenue, the linden trees have begun their transformation, their heart-shaped leaves turning pale yellow at the edges, some already loose and rattling against each other in the morning breeze with a sound like very gentle applause. An older man in a tweed jacket stands under one of them with his hands deep in his coat pockets, watching a single leaf detach and begin its slow, unhurried descent to the pavement. He does not move to catch it. He simply watches it fall, which is a kind of luxury this city does not often allow. On Madison Avenue the window displays have shifted overnight, mannequins appearing in cashmere sweaters and corduroy jackets, small arrangements of dried wheat and decorative gourds appearing in brownstone doorways, the first hot cider stands taking up their corners with the quiet confidence of a seasonal institution. The air carries the smell of it already. Cinnamon and apple and something faintly fermented, mixing with the diesel exhaust from the crosstown buses and the roasted coffee from the trucks parked along the curb.