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Lost in New York

by Pia de Jong

Whenever my neighbor gets off the train at Penn Station, he jumps on the platform, throws out his arms, and sings, "New York, New York, it's a helluva town! The Bronx is up, but the Battery's down!" He doesn't realize it, but this song from the musical *On The Town* is a mnemonic device to help me find my way around town.

People born with an internal compass can hardly imagine my panic when I walk into a city. According to my dear partner, who finds his way everywhere without looking, I am afflicted with "anti-sensory direction." Intuitively, I always walk exactly the wrong way.

The book "Going into Town: A Love Letter to New York" by the admired artist Roz Chast is an indispensable guide for people like me. Chast, born and raised in Brooklyn, moved to the suburbs when her youngest child was born. When she returned to study in the city again, she had to remember the city's geography all over again. In her book, she draws cartoons to explain the baffling cartography of Manhattan. Finally I understand that it is not just me who always get lost. The best-kept secret in New York is that no one knows where they are.

Consider the "grid." Supposedly it is logical. The broad avenues run from south to north, numbered from east to west — First Avenue, Second Avenue, and so on. The narrow streets run from east to west, numbered from south to north. The big exception is Broadway, which meanders through the middle with a mind of its own.

Then the trouble starts. There is no Fourth Avenue, because it is called Park and next to it are Madison and Lexington. In Greenwich Village, the streets are laid out like a pile of uncooked spaghetti tossed on a table. Farther south, people speak in cryptic abbreviations — Soho, Noho, Tribeca, Nolita, NoMad, Dumbo. Never mind Hell's Kitchen and the Meatpacking District.

But here's the strange thing: with every address you have to know whether it is east or west of Fifth Avenue. As my dear "helpful" partner says, "That's the y-axis of the coordinate system." Yes, exactly, you understand my despair.

So I had hoped to dine at a French restaurant on 42nd Street called Chez Josephine at No. 414. But then it turned out that No. 414 East 42 Street was somewhere in the East River. It took me a half-hour walk to get to the right address: 414 West 42 Street.

Armed with all this advance knowledge, I arrived at Penn Station last week. As a real New Yorker, I had ordered my coffee in advance via an app. A double decaf of extra foamy cappuccino with my name was ready on the counter. I navigated between the many commuters, bobbing and weaving my way to my destination. But at precisely the worst moment a man bumped my elbow. Coffee sloshed all over my clothes. Clouds of white foam flew into my hair. "Excuse me," I said. But the man kept walking, absorbed in his cell phone.

Ah, at that moment the music swelled. A sailor came tap-dancing up the street, flourished a napkin, and helped me dab the coffee off my shoes. At least that's the way it was in my dreams. In reality, with sticky hair and stains on my dress, I was a soggy mess all day long. New York, New York, it's a helluva town.

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her memoir, "Saving Charlotte," was published by W.W. Norton in 2017. She can be contacted at pdejong@ias.edu. She is filling in for Richard K. Rein, whose column will resume in this space next week.

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