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Opinion

Romancing the Suburbs

By CAMERON STRACHER JULY 5, 2001

They say you know you're a real New Yorker when you stop talking about leaving. If that's the case, the closest I came to the real thing was when we bought our apartment on the Upper West Side in 1995. But even then, leaving lurked at the edges, always palpable, like the smell of cooked meat that never quite vented from the stairwell. Eleven hundred square feet was just too small for the family we planned, and though our second bedroom was a luxury to our friends, it reminded us of the inevitable.

But for a while, childless, we romanced the city. The winding paths of Central Park. The shops and restaurants of SoHo and TriBeCa. Films at the Angelika, concerts at the Cloisters, theater in a Chelsea walkup. We even managed to attend the opera, falling asleep midway through a performance (in English translation) of "The Magic Flute."

The birth of our son brought new pleasures. Hippo Park felt like one large backyard, complete with swings, sandbox and sprinkler. Broadway was a boulevard for baby strollers and the restaurants that parked them. Within a few blocks of our apartment, our son discovered Dr. Seuss at the Children's Museum, dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum and tambourines at Music Together. In a city famed for its inconveniences, the greatest attribute was convenience. Diapers at every corner, food

of any kind delivered at any hour. The office, the gym, the nursery school, all a quick zip on foot or on the subway.

But the arrival of our daughter brought a close to these days. For a while we fought the inevitable. (Buy the apartment next door?) We were New Yorkers, after all, inured to clawing our way into nursery school and Zabar's. In the end, however, we succumbed. The suburbs called, and we simply couldn't fight any longer. The kids needed grass, room to run, places to jump where the neighbors wouldn't complain, and schools we could rely on (and afford). Their parents needed peace.

Some leave of their own free will; others have leaving thrust upon them. But leave they must. The city demands it. Already I can feel the great stirring among our friends, the realization that maybe they can't make it here (but they could make it in New Rochelle). The city, like all romances, is for the young and foolhardy. Leaving (or being left) is the natural state of affairs. There's no consolation in this, not even the comfort of blame, only the "I told you so" echoes of earlier lovers.

I leave without joy, overcome in a struggle in which I never quite managed to come out on top. But it was a great ride while it lasted, and all too brief. In the end, I learned, no one really owns New York; we just rent it.

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