

# I Miss Last Night Already



1917

## Shimmer on the Harbor

An image of the early skyline that appeared in *The Edison Monthly*, a publication of the New York Edison Company dedicated to celebrating the wonders of illumination.





BY JAY McINERNEY

**I** AM A LIFELONG INSOMNIAC, so it was inevitable that I would make New York my home. Even if I don't venture out late on a given night, it is a great comfort, at 2 a.m. or 4 a.m., to know that I can, that there are others out there on the streets, working and playing, restless and questing for love, drugs, food, sex, or cash, that the streets are bathed in yellow light. Elsewhere, midnight is the end of the night, but in New York, it's the middle, if not the beginning. For some of us, the possibility junkies, the city is far more welcoming after dark, vivid and electric, inexhaustible in its store of potential pleasures. The night is egalitarian in a way that the day is not. By day, New York is segregated into professional ghettos, but at night the boundaries are loosened. The city becomes more cosmopolitan as the tribes mix; the lawyers doff their ties, and the nocturnal dandies don their makeup. After a day of drudgery, the office intern lies down ➤➤



for a nap and emerges, hours later, having metamorphosed into Cinderella.

Not every night is eventful, of course, even the ones you were most hopeful about. Still, especially when you're thinking about nightlife in the past tense, it's hard not to romanticize what happened, even, or maybe especially, if you weren't there. I'm sorry that I missed New York in the '20s, during Prohibition. (The lure of the forbidden is always more compelling than an engraved invitation. Who wouldn't rather be an outlaw, really?) But the greatest era of nighttime in New York is always the one that coincides with your own youth. The darkness never seems so rich in promise as it does when you're in your 20s.

When I arrived in the city in November 1979—one of its most mythologized eras, I know, but it was mine—the death of the disco age had just been sealed when Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager were busted for tax evasion. And what replaced Studio 54 and Xenon was grittier, more egalitarian, and, to our minds, way cooler and more authentic. It was a kind of punk reaction to glitzy disco, although elements of disco, including a pervasive pansexuality, were subsumed into this new order. Punk had been invented on the Lower East Side a few years before I arrived, and in late '79 it was still possible to hear the Ramones in CBGB, or Talking Heads at the Mudd Club, or Iggy Pop at the Peppermint Lounge. They were places where a wide-eyed aspiring writer/*New Yorker* fact-checker dressed like a preppe could rub shoulders with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, Lou Reed and David Byrne, Jim Carroll and William Burroughs, as well as the drag queens, club kids, and drug dealers who were the glue of the scene.

It's easy to glamorize the decay now, but the city was teetering on the edge of the financial brink; bankruptcy had been narrowly averted, but jobs and affluent white people were still fleeing for the suburbs. A heroin epidemic was ravaging the poorer neighborhoods of the city, creating a wave of crime that spilled over everywhere. The whiff of danger had become the scent of the Manhattan streets. You quickly developed a sixth sense, and you tried to keep it turned on even as you got obliterated on alcohol and drugs.

I suppose this era was probably almost finished by the time I had a book party for my first novel at Area, the sprawling Tribeca club with art installations that changed every six weeks and legendary coed bathrooms that were the scenes of epic orgies.

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The fête was arranged by a party promoter—a phrase that was brand-new to me then. In 1985, not long after my party, Rubell and Schrager, having served their prison sentences, took their show downtown, opening a huge club in the Palladium, a former concert hall on East 14th Street. I remember showing up after midnight for the opening, joining at least 2,000 people on the sidewalk desperate for entry. Where the hell had they all come from? It felt like the end of something—if only my 20s.

I can't help feeling the night has been tamed, packaged, and commodified in recent years, that the downtown I was part of has become a kind of brand. Perhaps that was always inevitable in a place that's the world capital of money. Or maybe the real scene has moved elsewhere, to Bushwick or Ridgewood or somewhere that trend-piece writers haven't yet discovered. I suspect that young people still venture out after dark in New York City with something more propulsive than cash—and with the same sense of wonder and hope that we did. ■

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