



NEW YORK, I LOVE YOU

In the current transformative moment for New York, Tunisian model Kenza Fourati pens a love letter to the city where she found a true sense of belonging and resilience

IF CITIES EXISTED IN THE FORM OF questions, New York's would be simple and relentless – *Why are you here?* Walking its streets in winter, the question feels physical. The sky is bright, deceptively blue. Sunlight ricochets off glass towers along the East River, briefly convincing you the cold has loosened its grip. But the illusion fades quickly – dirty snow clings to sidewalks, blackened by exhaust fumes, leaking trash bags and dog urine. Moving through the city requires precision and careful

choreography that forces you to slow down and look down in a place designed to make you look up.

This is New York – beauty and abrasion side by side. Spend enough time here and you will realise the city is not a place; it's a story constantly being rewritten. Mine began in 2000 when I first walked the streets as a tourist at the age of 14. Nothing in that moment was particularly enchanting, and yet I felt something unmistakable – recognition, as if I had

arrived somewhere I already belonged. The cosmopolis felt like a lineage, like stepping into an unfinished narrative written by millions who had gathered here to begin again. For some, the place is a chapter of transition. For others, it is the whole book. Whatever the story, it does not dwell on where you come from. And yet almost everyone arrives holding onto something. It is the most linguistically diverse place in the world, and somehow, everyone speaks the same language.

I moved here in 2004, not long after that teenage certainty to pursue a career in modelling, although I was still going back and forth to Europe for work. At 18, I quickly learnt that the city does not cushion you. It demands alertness, resilience and adaptability. At that time, there were very few Arab models. Unsure how to place me, many agencies cast me as a Latina instead. The mismatch was strange, but it rarely stopped me. Labels felt flimsy here. What mattered was not which box you fit into, but whether you showed up and held your ground. I remember that one of my first castings was for Tommy Hilfiger's TV show *The Cut*. At that time, I had to rush my visa process. I ended up getting the job and the visa. Somehow, I found my way in the city and built a successful career. Currently, I've been writing more. Apart from working on Osay The Label, the ethical footwear company I cofounded with Simone Carrica, I'm developing a scripted TV show about the modelling world. I have also previously written the Women of Integrity portrait series for *Vogue Italia*.

In New York, I feel like a citizen of the world. I had not grown up that way. In Tunisia, identity is relational. The collective comes first. What you do reflects on your family, community and sometimes your history. New York teaches the inverse. Individuality is not only permitted; it is expected. And yet, this does not erase the community. Here, belonging is not inherited; it is built – one block, one street, one borough at a time.

For a long time, my faith in New York was unshakable. I built a life here. Friends. Love. Career. Family. Like generations before me, I was writing my story in the metropolis, but it was never mine alone. For generations, it has been the gateway to America – the first landing, the first test, the first translation – a conduit through which the world enters the country, reshaping it in the process.

However, the war in Gaza forced me to confront something I had avoided mentioning. Even in New York, universalism has its limits. Some of the grief was met with immediate recognition; other losses required

debate and justification. The imbalance was impossible to ignore. With it came a rupture – not only in my sense of belonging, but also in how I understood the city.

I returned to New York's central question – *Why was I here? What did I believe this place stood for? Did it still hold space for people like me?* Spring is returning slowly this year. The light lingers longer. The dirty snow retreats reluctantly, still clinging to the edges of the streets. Renewal here is never clean. It arrives with residue. Inside that disorientation, something else emerged. I began to see who was standing nearby – people aligned not by labels, but by values, creativity and shared grief. People who had also been told that what they cared about was inconvenient, excessive and unrealistic. What I had mistaken for isolation was entirely something else.

One afternoon, I overheard my seven-year-old daughter say to a friend, "My grandmother is Palestinian. I feel the war, but you can't understand it." Her

friend replied without hesitation, "What do you mean, I can't understand war? I'm from Haiti." There was no hierarchy in the exchange. No contest of suffering, just recognition. Slowly, that shared reality surfaced more visibly. New York wrote a new chapter by electing Zohran Mamdani, an immigrant Muslim mayor. What some saw as an anomaly was, in fact, deeply consistent with a city shaped by people born elsewhere, formed elsewhere and made here. The city is in the middle of a real cultural reset – driven by youth, diversity and global voices – and fashion is finally starting to reflect that.

New York does not save us, it reflects us. Loving the city doesn't mean believing it is perfect, but that it is capable of reckoning, correction and renewal. It remakes itself through those who arrive, those who stay and those who refuse to abandon its unfinished promise. Here, hope is never abstract. It is something you practise and protect. Something you build... together. ■

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Kenza Fourati with her husband, Egyptian journalist, anchor and political commentator Ayman Mohyeldin