1. New York
1815–1855

Dirty, unhealthy, violent, corrupt. It is the lesser-known face of mid-nineteenth-century New York City. Pigs root through the garbage on the streets of the poorest neighborhoods. These are the neighborhoods where immigrants live crammed together in inhumane conditions. Recurrent cholera epidemics wreak havoc on them. Anger and tensions that have built up in the slums of Manhattan explode into bloody riots.

The other side of the city is that of the merchants, Wall Street brokers and immigrants who go on to succeed. One of them is John Jacob Astor, who arrived in New York in his twenties without a penny from Germany, where he had worked in his father’s butcher shop. In the early 1800s, he became the first multimillionaire in the U.S. thanks to the fur trade and fruitful investments in Manhattan’s real estate boom.

Emma Stebbins is born on September 1, 1815, lucky to belong to the affluent half of Gotham. Her father and brothers work in a bank or on the stock exchange, but they do not think only of making money like the rich people mocked in Potiphar Papers by Emma’s contemporary, writer George William Curtis. Her family is also sensitive to culture and art.

“Few lady artists of this or any country have been surrounded with circumstances more favorable to the development of genius,” writes historian Elizabeth F. Ellet in her collection of profiles of women painters and sculptors throughout time, published in 1859, three years after Emma’s arrival in Rome and her decision to live there.

In fact, New York is too small for this young woman from a well-to-do family, who is not content with compliments on her “amateur” works; nor is she resigned to a “business” marriage — to the son of another banker or merchant — as so many did in those years.
More than a third of the wealthiest New Yorkers are married to each other in 1856, when Emma embarks for Europe. She, on the other hand, remains a spinster.

Emma is the only one of John Stebbins’s four daughters not to get married. They are many in the family. In addition to Emma, Mary, Angelina, and Caroline, there are four brothers, John Wilson, Charles Largin, Henry George, and William Augustus. All were born within a couple of years of each other, between 1807 and 1824. Their father, John, a native of Connecticut, could afford it: He is the manager of one of the few banks operating in early nineteenth century New York City, the North Riverbank. Their mother, Mary Largin, is from Nova Scotia, Canada.

It is impossible to know where exactly they lived. I have scoured the archives and records of the period, public and private, but they are either inaccurate or lost in the fires that frequently destroyed entire areas of Manhattan in the first half of the nineteenth century. The only trace I have found is in the records of Trinity Church, one of New York’s oldest and most prestigious churches, founded in the late eighteenth century by a small group of Anglicans. These records have survived and are available online: They document Emma’s baptism there on October 15, 1815, a month and a half after her birth. The church is quite close to Wall Street, to this day the heart of trade and finance. But in the early decades of the nineteenth century, this southernmost part of Manhattan was full not only of thriving businesses but also of wealthy families. So, we might assume that Emma’s home must also have been in and around here.

Outside the four domestic walls, life is bustling in that neighborhood, as it became bustling again after the economic recession of 1990–1991, when many office-occupied skyscrapers were converted into residential condominiums. I remember my first time in the Big Apple in 1994, dispatched by the Corriere della Sera’s business weekly magazine: Walking around Wall Street and its environs on a Sunday morning, there was dead silence and no one on the street. Now, on the other hand, the Financial District is bustling, full
of people, new restaurants and hotels, and stores of all kinds (there is even a Tiffany & Co. store near the Stock Exchange). But nothing like the chaos of two centuries ago.

Around Emma’s house there is traffic from the port, comings and goings of merchants and bankers and their clerks and employees. This is where new stores open, displaying goods in a more sophisticated way; previously, the importers sold their products directly from ships, and artisans offered them in their shops. The origin of one of the iconic “Made in the USA” brands dates back to these years: On Cherry Street (near the river, to be convenient for both sailors and the bourgeois) in 1818 Henry Sands Brooks founded the men’s clothing store, which, inherited by his sons, would change its name to Brooks Brothers.

The neighborhood’s chaos and noise are such that residents complain. Even more so from 1825 onward, when the Erie Canal, the navigable waterway linking New York Harbor to the Great Lakes and thus to America’s Midwestern markets, opens for operation. The city becomes the commercial center of the country, a favorite destination for importers from England and for fugitives from hunger and political oppression in Europe as well. As a result, the population explodes from about a hundred thousand in 1815 to half a million in 1850.

Emma’s father, John, and brothers John Wilson and Henry do well in and around Wall Street. They always stop on their business day at the Tontine Coffee House, on the corner of Wall Street and Water Street. They go there not so much to drink coffee as to hear the latest market news, to haggle and close deals, and to talk politics and more. Until 1817 this special café functions as the headquarters of the Stock Exchange: On the second floor, brokers buy and sell stocks. In the rest of the building, people trade everything from barrels of rum to bales of cotton. After business hours, the Tontine Coffee House becomes a sort of social center where, among other things, meetings, banquets, and dances are held.

It is here on November 9, 1820, that the Mercantile Library is founded, a library aimed at young merchant clerks and an institution
of which John Wilson Stebbins would be the president between 1831 and 1834. The idea comes from William Wood, a former clerk who has built a career and is convinced of the importance of educating young men employed in commerce: He wants them not only to be good at their jobs and to become merchants in their own right, but also to be good citizens with a decent general education, not slaves to “vices.” He wants to keep them away from the hovels where cheap rum is drunk and from the gambling halls and brothels.

Nearly two hundred and fifty young men respond to Wood’s call, gather at the Tontine Coffee House, and decide to establish the library, which within a few years is so successful that it wins the support of a prominent group of businessmen, including the richest and most famous of them, John Jacob Astor. Thanks to this funding, the Mercantile Library moves in 1830 to a new location, Clinton Hall, purposely built on the corner of Nassau and Beekman Streets, close to Wall Street. The library’s membership has increased to one thousand two hundred, it has more than six thousand volumes for consultation and lending, and the new reading rooms are open to all, including writers. Edgar Allan Poe works there drafting some of the Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.

Does Emma ask her brother to bring home books from the Mercantile Library? To figure this out, I looked for her traces in The Center for Fiction in Brooklyn, an heir to the Mercantile Library. I knew that the Mercantile Library had commissioned her to create a bust of its president, John Wilson Stebbins. I found it in one of the reading rooms reserved for members, on a dark, ultra-modern coffee table — like all the decor around it — in the company of two books by 2021 Nobel Laureate in Literature Abdulrazak Gurnah: Paradise and Desertion.

The bust’s white marble and neoclassical style stand out, contrasting with the minimalist gray tones of the environment. But as I study it, I think John Wilson’s look would not be out of place on the streets of today’s trendy Brooklyn neighborhoods, in the middle of hipsters’ beards and retro styles.

Emma’s brother has a thin chinstrap beard, his hair is parted
into wide wavy locks, his lips are heart-shaped, and his nose is long, straight, and thin. She has sculpted him with a noble and sweet air. The signature: “Emma Stebbins. Rome 1865.”

I was also hoping to find documents about the years when John Wilson was president of the Mercantile Library and how the bust was later commissioned from his sister. Instead, I found nothing. In 2021 The Center for Fiction celebrated two hundred years since the library opened in 1821, but its archives are stored in an inaccessible repository, the library manager told me. Perhaps they will reopen one day.

For Emma to have her brother bring home books from the Mercantile Library would be a way to build herself an education different from that provided for the girls of her day. Even in New York, the daughters of well-to-do families can attend only private schools that prepare them to behave with the grace and etiquette necessary to make a good impression in society and to win the “right” kind of husband. It is not until 1838 that the first institution resembling a women’s high school, the Rutgers Female Institute, is founded: Literature, history, mathematics, and philosophy are taught there, but the course of study lasts only one year and does not give access to the university. Neither the University of the City of New York (today’s New York University or NYU), created in 1831, nor the City College of New York, founded in 1847 (now part of the CUNY system), nor Columbia College (whose origin dates back to 1754) admit female students (incidentally, women would not be admitted to Columbia University until 1983).

Emma, however, is interested in other things. She is not fascinated by the pleasures of social life — the receptions, balls, shopping, tea, and chatting in social salons — which are everything to most of her middle-class New York peers.

Beautiful she is not, but neither is she ugly: a spacious forehead, thin nose, long neck, hazel eyes, long brown hair gathered at the nape of her neck, with a slender physique wrapped in a simple white dress embellished only by a black veil falling from her head. No jewelry, no sexy cleavage. Her gaze is turned elsewhere — not to
the viewer — immersed in her thoughts. This is the young woman who appears in a Miss Stebbins of New York portrait painted by Samuel Stillman Osgood (now in a private collection, after being at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). It is almost certainly Emma, according to her great-great-great-niece, the art historian Elizabeth Milroy, author of two seminal essays on the sculptor’s work.

But there is another portrait of Emma as a young woman, hitherto unknown. It was shown to me by another descendant of hers, whom I discovered by leafing through the financial statements of the Central Park Conservancy, the nonprofit organization that has managed and cared for the park since 1980. “Conservation of the Angel of the Waters statue is supported by an endowment from Mrs. Alison Heydt Tung, a descendent of sculptor Emma Stebbins,” reads the 2010 Annual Report.

Emma’s brother Henry was the grandfather of Alison’s grandfather. I meet her one December morning at her home on 72nd Street, not far from Central Park. She taught literature in high school and is a composer, a member of the Musicians Club of New York. Green-eyed and smiling, she welcomes me kindly. She is happy that someone wants to revive her ancestor’s memory.

She shows me the family papers. Unfortunately, they are few and include only two unpublished letters, both addressed to Henry Stebbins, one from Emma and the other from Charlotte (they are dated 1865, and I shall discuss them later).

But the big surprise is the painting hanging above a sofa in the living room. It is a portrait of Emma, Alison has no doubt: She is dressed for outdoor adventure, in a dark green dress with a wide white embroidered collar, a wide-brimmed black hat adorned with long feathers, ivory gloves, and a riding crop in her left hand.

“I look at her and say hi to my great-great-great-aunt Emma every day,” Alison tells me. She also wrote about it in an article for the Central Park Conservancy Bulletin: “It looks like a typical nineteenth-century depiction of a marriageable young girl, but I also see it as slyly subversive,” Alison observes.
Her right arm rests ever so casually on a mounting block that is certainly not wood or anything moveable for a woman to use to get, side-saddle, onto a horse. Perhaps she is saying, “Well, I’ll pose for you. I know I look charming in this riding outfit, but I’m making sure that my body is touching the thing I really intend to love, once you relatives are through with your fantasy of me, and that’s ... bronze!”

It is impossible to know what material that mounting block is truly made of. The Angel of the Waters is made of bronze, but the future sculptor will work mostly with marble. However, I agree with Alison about the “slyly subversive” air: Emma’s gaze is enigmatic, almost impertinent, and her slightly arched eyebrows accentuate the impression of defiance.

“Knowing that perhaps Emma got the job of creating the Angel of the Waters because her brother was one of the park’s commissioners: That has upset me for a long time,” Alison confides to me. “But in the end, it only matters that she deserved it, right?” She then asks me if I want to go with her to the Bethesda Fountain.

Of course; I can’t miss this opportunity. The weather is mild, few clouds are in the sky, and the park still has some colors of autumn foliage, red and yellow on the trees. Alison guides me to the fountain along the most scenic path. Then we walk around the Angel. I take a few pictures. She suggests we take a selfie, and then a typical “New York moment” happens, one of those situations where the most diverse people meet quite randomly and discover with pleasure that they have something unexpected in common.

I ask the first person I see sitting on the edge of the fountain (dry for the winter season) if he can take our picture with my cell phone. He is a nice-looking middle-aged gentleman, who obviously accepts immediately. I can tell from his accent that he is Italian: a Milanese on vacation with his family, one of the very first tourists to arrive in the U.S. with the reopening of the borders after the COVID lockdowns. And when I explain to him who Alison is and why we are there, he thinks it is a big deal and wants in turn a picture with his wife, children, and Alison in the center, in front of the Angel.
Then Alison takes me to meet Carlos, who plays guitar under the archway of Bethesda Terrace, in front of the fountain. “He is here almost always,” she explains, “and I come here often, especially when my spirit needs healing from anxieties and ailments. I love Carlos’s music, as simple and full of grace as Emma’s statue: Both, for me, have the power to calm and reassure.” We stay for a long time listening to the artist’s harmonies, looking at the Angel in the background. It is an almost mystical experience, even amidst the bustle of passersby.

I reluctantly leave Alison, promising (by way of thanking her for her time) to cook her risotto at my home. The promise kept on April 26, 2022.

From 1831 to 1840, Clinton Hall houses not only the Mercantile Library but also the American artists’ association, National Academy of Design (NAD). Therefore, as early as her teenage years Emma is able not only to read the books in that library, but also to savor the creative atmosphere of the painters and sculptors who have made it their point of reference. And she can thus discover that she indeed loves this world and longs to be a part of it.

The NAD’s first vice-president is painter Henry Inman, famous for his skill in portraits. He will paint one of Henry Stebbins in 1838: It shows Stebbins dressed in an elegant black jacket, white shirt, with a gold chain on his chest, curly brown hair long over his ears, smiling and looking optimistic (the painting is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York).

Through her brother, Inman gets to know Emma, invites her to visit his studio, and offers her oil painting lessons.

Early on, Emma engages in the typical tasks of an artist’s apprenticeship: She trains with pastel drawings and copies or imitates masterpieces by European classics and contemporaries. Art historian Ellet, mentioned earlier, cites among Emma’s works a Saint John copied from the French artist Claude Marie Dubufe, Girl Dictating a Love-Letter taken from a painting in the Louvre, and Boy and Bird’s Nest in the style of the Spaniard Murillo. Ellet also writes about A Book of Prayer in which Emma collected poems — one written by
herself — and illustrated them with the ancient technique of miniature painting.

The walls of Henry’s house — the first of the brothers to marry, in 1831 — are filled with Emma’s work, her sister Mary recalls in her Notes on the Art Life of Emma Stebbins. This book is only eight pages long — never published, now in the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library — and contains very few details about Emma’s private side.

Emma’s is not a sheltered life, immune from the tragedies that convulse New York City. In just four years she loses her father, who dies in 1834 when she is nineteen, and two brothers, Charles in 1836 and John in 1837. The cause of the three bereavements, so close together, is not known.

We do know, however, that from 1832 to 1835 a cholera epidemic raged in New York City, killing three thousand five hundred people, more than two percent of the one hundred sixty thousand who had remained in the city (ten times the percentage of deaths in the total population caused by COVID in Italy and the United States in 2020–2021). As many as eighty thousand New Yorkers escaped to safety by fleeing to the countryside or resort towns.

The victims are concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods around Five Points (located in today’s Chinatown), where sanitary conditions are pestilential. Garbage piles up in the streets, there are no sewers or potable water — people drink water pumped out of polluted wells. Human excrement is kept in private pits or, worse, in bins that are emptied periodically by municipal workers, one of the few professions reserved — as is the case — for Black people (slavery was abolished in 1827 in New York State). In the summer the stench is unbearable, and when storms cause flooding, human waste ends up on the street mixed with animal waste. It is the ideal environment for the spread of cholera, that intestinal infection caused by bacteria that grow mostly in water and food contaminated with human feces. Those who become seriously ill can die within hours from dehydration and electrolyte imbalance caused by diarrhea and vomiting.
In the first half of the nineteenth century, the profession of medicine seems to be groping in the dark; the cholera bacterium has not been identified, and there is no cure. Some preachers in New York, such as Sylvester Graham, even claim that cholera affects those who live lives of vice, drink too much, and have too much sex.

Business slows down, many stores and offices remain closed, but the Stock Exchange continues to function. Not all merchants and brokers have fled. Among them are pious men, who on July 16, 1832, at the height of the epidemic, disgusted by the ineptitude of the city government, gather at the Merchants’ Exchange, the Wall Street building where the Stock Exchange and the Chamber of Commerce are based. They set up a committee of benefactors and within a few days raise thousands of dollars for the cholera-stricken poor. They distribute food and clothing and give money directly to families so they can clean and sanitize their homes. These same gentlemen visit the needy and bring them aid.

Who knows if Emma’s father is among them and if then the deaths of the two brothers are not related to the aftermath of cholera, or if they die of one of the many other infectious diseases raging in New York, from typhoid to diphtheria to tuberculosis.

With the father and two older brothers gone, Henry becomes the head of the Stebbins family. He is only twenty-six years old but has already had quite a career. His father wanted him to become a lawyer and enrolled him in a private school to prepare for college. A blow to his head—perhaps delivered with a heavy ruler by an impatient teacher, as was common practice in those days—interrupts his course of study. Doctors advise against continuing, and his father sends young Henry to cut his teeth working in a bank.

Henry is bright, and with one promotion after another he goes from errand boy to manager. At age twenty, with his savings he sets up his own business as a broker, and at twenty-two, in 1833, he becomes a member of the Stock Exchange, the main occupation of the rest of his life (he will be the president of the Stock Exchange for three terms, in 1851-1852, 1858-1859, 1863-1864).
In addition to his business and his wife and children, Henry has to take care of his mother and of Emma and the other unmarried siblings. Times are not easy. With the cholera eradicated, the Great Fire breaks out on December 16, 1835. Firefighters are few and are only volunteers; the water is frozen, and so in two days fire destroys almost all the buildings — 674, to be exact — from Wall Street to the southern tip of Manhattan and to the East River.

Even worse than the fire would be speculation fever that plunges Wall Street into panic two years later. Bankers, merchants, and brokers like Henry have rebuilt the Stock Exchange and other buildings quickly and more solidly and elegantly than before. The city experiences another economic boom, new banks pop up like mushrooms, and they can print dollars in abundance (the U.S. central bank, the Federal Reserve, the sole issuer of the currency, would not be founded until 1913). Prices of everything — from real estate to bread — skyrocket. So much so that it triggers a people’s revolt: On February 13, 1837, five thousand people storm a warehouse and steal or destroy tons of flour and grain, until they are stopped by the military who have been alerted by the mayor. The Flour Riot anticipates the Wall Street Crash by a month. In March, all prices, including stock prices, begin to plummet. Banks stop lending money, customers rush to withdraw deposits and are unable to, companies go bankrupt, and the city falls into a period of economic depression.

Henry G. Stebbins is not overwhelmed. He manages to maintain a high standard of living for himself and his large family. Thanks to him, Emma can continue to study art at the National Academy of Design, where, in 1839, she discovers what her true calling is. That is the year that the young, self-taught sculptor Edward Augustus Brackett arrives in town from Cincinnati, Ohio. He is twenty-one, three years younger than Emma, who meets him at the academy when Brackett exhibits some of his work there.

Emma likes his neoclassical style, and she likes him, a progressive free thinker. Twenty years later Brackett will create the bust of John Brown, who went down in history as the icon of the abolition movement. He visits Brown in prison, while he is awaiting execution by hanging after failing to incite the slaves to rebellion at Harpers
Ferry, Virginia. Brackett takes measurements and draws a sketch of John Brown’s head to later sculpt it in marble.

Brackett remains in New York only until 1841, two precious years for Emma’s training. The aspiring artist asks him to teach her his method of work, from sketches on paper to clay models to the use of chisels and other tools needed to hew and smooth marble. It is a strenuous art, seemingly unsuitable for a woman who is not robust and not used to physical exercise. Yet Emma falls in love with sculpting, realizing that it “is the most satisfying medium of expression for her,” writes her sister Mary. Emma feels she has a sculptor’s talent and vision. She can see in her mind’s eye the perfect image of the work to be made, and she likes to employ all the possible strength of her hands, her arms, her whole body to translate the idea into matter.

Emma enthusiastically begins to put Brackett’s lessons into practice. She produces a bas-relief portrait of one sister, a statuette of another, sketches a bust of her brother Henry, and “boldly” — Mary recalls — tries her hand at the neoclassical style by modeling “a boy catching a ball.”

In 1842 Emma achieves the first recognition of her talent. An academician nominates her to join the National Academy of Design as an “associate” member, the category reserved for amateurs. Along with her, five other artists are nominated: the aforementioned Samuel Stillman Osgood, who is thirty-four years old; the two landscape painters Jesse Talbot, thirty-seven, and Montgomery Livingstone, twenty-six; and two other women, Margaret Maclay Bogardus, thirty-eight, a specialist in miniatures, and Mary Ann Delafield DuBois, twenty-nine, a sculptor and friend of Brackett’s.

Membership in the National Academy of Design is limited: Members are divided between academicians and associates, a maximum of one hundred in each category. To become a member after being nominated by an academician, candidates must exhibit their works in the year in which they are proposed; then they must be elected by a vote of the academicians and deliver a portrait of themselves to the NAD within one year of election.
The portrait of Emma painted by Osgood looks like the one intended for the academy, according to Elizabeth Milroy. But for unspecified violations of procedures, the election of Emma and the other candidates is annulled. In 1845 Osgood, Talbot, and Bogardus will be admitted, and Livingstone will become an honorary member in 1847. Of the original candidates, Emma and DuBois remain excluded. DuBois probably does not run again because she is too busy with her family (married in 1832, over twenty years she will give birth to ten children) and her philanthropic commitments (among other things, she is co-founder and director of New York’s first children’s hospital).

For Emma, on the other hand, the reasons for her exclusion from the academy remain mysterious, Milroy points out. However, Emma is not deterred by this setback. She continues painting, sculpting, and sending her works to exhibitions, and in 1843 and 1844 she exhibits portrait drawings at NAD. The following year she sends Portrait of a Lady to the Artists’ Fund Society exhibition in Philadelphia. In 1847 she participates in a special exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts with the oil paintings John in the Wilderness and French Sweep Boy, both copied from Dubufe and owned by her brother Henry. And in 1855 she reappears at the National Academy of Design’s annual exhibition with two pastel portraits.

Henry encourages and supports Emma in her artistic ambitions because she is his sister and because he truly loves art. He will demonstrate this on many occasions throughout his life: For example, he will be one of the promoters of the creation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1870. He embellishes his home with an extensive private collection, which also includes a painting by another woman who has entered his family, Mary Pillsbury Weston, the stepmother of his wife, Sarah Augusta Weston.

It is a bizarre situation: Henry’s mother-in-law is almost ten years younger than his wife and two years younger than his sister Emma, and she also paints and exhibits her works at the NAD.

In her collection of profiles of women painters and sculptors of
all time, Ellet devotes twice as many pages to Mary Pillsbury Weston than she does to Emma. The reason is not so much the quality of Mary’s work, I am convinced, but the fascination with her exciting life. Born in a village in the mountains of New Hampshire, the daughter of a Protestant priest with strict Calvinist morals, Mary ran away from home a couple of times while she was still a young girl to pursue her dream of becoming a professional artist. By her early twenties she managed to move to Willington, Connecticut, earning a living as a portrait painter for local wealthy families. There she met New York craftsman Valentine Weston, a widower thirty-two years her senior and Sarah Augusta’s father, who offered to put Mary up in Manhattan and pay for her painting lessons. It was a proposal impossible to refuse, as was the subsequent marriage proposal. The wedding was celebrated in 1840.

*Angel Gabriel and Infant Saviour* is the title of the picture painted by Mary in the style of the Murillo that Henry owns. Mary’s specialty in fact is copying the classics. Emma does it too, but she is unlikely to see Mary as a competitor. Perhaps instead Emma feels empathy and respect for Mary because of her courage to leave village and family, willing to do whatever it takes to follow her passion.

Wall Street, art, and a complicated family do not exhaust Henry’s commitments. He is also a colonel in the Twelfth New York Infantry Regiment, an armed volunteer corps that intervenes, along with the Seventh Regiment, to quell the Astor Place riot on May 10, 1849.

It is an uproar sparked by a seemingly frivolous but actually complex motive: the performance of a famous British actor, William Charles Macready, playing the title character in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in the Astor Opera House, the luxury theater recently built on the most fashionable and exclusive stretch of Broadway. For fans of the American actor Edwin Forrest, Macready’s rival, it is a provocation. These fans are blue-collar workers — both Americans and Irish immigrants — who like to revel in the popular theaters of the Bowery and take the opportunity to protest the elite, the “one percent” of the city, who flaunt English aristocratic tastes.

At Macready’s first performance on May 7, several protesters
manage to enter the theater, hurl boos at him, and cover him with rotten eggs, forcing him to leave the stage. Fifty or so “decent” citizens and outraged intellectuals — including writers Herman Melville and Washington Irving — publish an appeal asking the authorities to restore order and grant the actor the right to perform. The newly elected Mayor Caleb S. Woodhull calls on the city’s armed forces to be ready to intervene in case of disturbances. The Bowery’s grassroots leaders respond by raising again the challenge: “Will the Americans or the British rule this city? Come express your opinion tonight at the aristocratic English Opera House!” read flyers distributed by the “American Committee.”

On the evening of May 10, pandemonium breaks out. Inside the theater the anti-Macready people again boo the actor; outside, an angry crowd of ten thousand gathers and begins throwing stones at the building. The stones smash windows and end up in the stalls. Police and military intervene and fire their service weapons, first in the air and then at eye level. Twenty-two die, one hundred and fifty are wounded, and one hundred and seventeen arrested: printers, butchers, carpenters, servants, machinists, bricklayers, bakers, plumbers, laborers, and clerks.

Underneath the Forrest v. Macready feud simmers frustration over the “real or seeming increase in the inequality of conditions between the very rich and the very poor,” future president Theodore Roosevelt would explain in his 1891 book *New York*, a short history of his city.

In other words, as colossal fortunes grow up on the one hand, there grows up on the other a large tenement-house population, partly composed of wage-earners who never save anything, and partly of those who never earn quite enough to give their families even the necessaries of life. This ominous increase in the numbers of the class of the hopelessly poor is one among the injuries which have to a greater or less degree offset the benefits accruing to the country during the present century, because of the unrestricted European immigration.
Emma did not go to the Astor Opera House on the evening of May 10, you can be sure. Her brother Henry must have warned her to stay locked in the house.

By now Emma is over thirty years old and, according to her sister Mary, she is discouraged because in New York there are not the opportunities and facilities necessary for “her branch of work.” Her passion “slumbers.” Perhaps she no longer even attends the National Academy of Design, which in 1850 moves its headquarters to a new building at 663 Broadway, one block north of Bleecker Street.

From there up toward Union Square and beyond is the area of Manhattan to which the wealthy move to get as far away from the slums as possible. In the areas of Five Points, Corlear’s Hook, and Dutch Hill, along the Hudson River shoreline and in the Black enclave around Banker Street — between Wall Street and what is now the Lower East Side — a “respectable citizen” should not go, warns writer Solon Robinson in the 1854 bestseller *Hot Corn*. Such a citizen risks at the very least a shove from a drunk who hates him because he wears nice clothes or because he thinks he wants to redeem him.

To get a picture of the climate of unrest and violence in the New York City of those years, watch — if you have not seen it yet — Martin Scorsese’s *Gangs of New York*, which was nominated for the Oscar for Best Picture in 2002 (it deserved it, in my opinion). The clash between the Protestant “native” Americans, led by Bill the Butcher (Daniel Day-Lewis) and the Irish Catholic Dead Rabbits, led by Vallon, the father of Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio), with which the film begins, gives an idea of the dozens of gang wars that broke out around the Five Points between 1830 and 1860. The reconstruction of the setting (all done in the Cinecittà studios in Rome) is quite accurate, historians confirm, except for the excess of blood let loose in the streets by Scorsese.

These are years of increasing poverty, disease, and crime, while the city administration thinks of other things: City councilors are nicknamed the “Forty Thieves,” as they are intent only on enriching themselves by dispensing favors in exchange for bribes.

What’s left for you to do, Emma, in such a New York City?