

THE BIG APPLE OF MY EYE

A Southerner's favorite New York experiences are rich with the quirky charm and hospitality of home

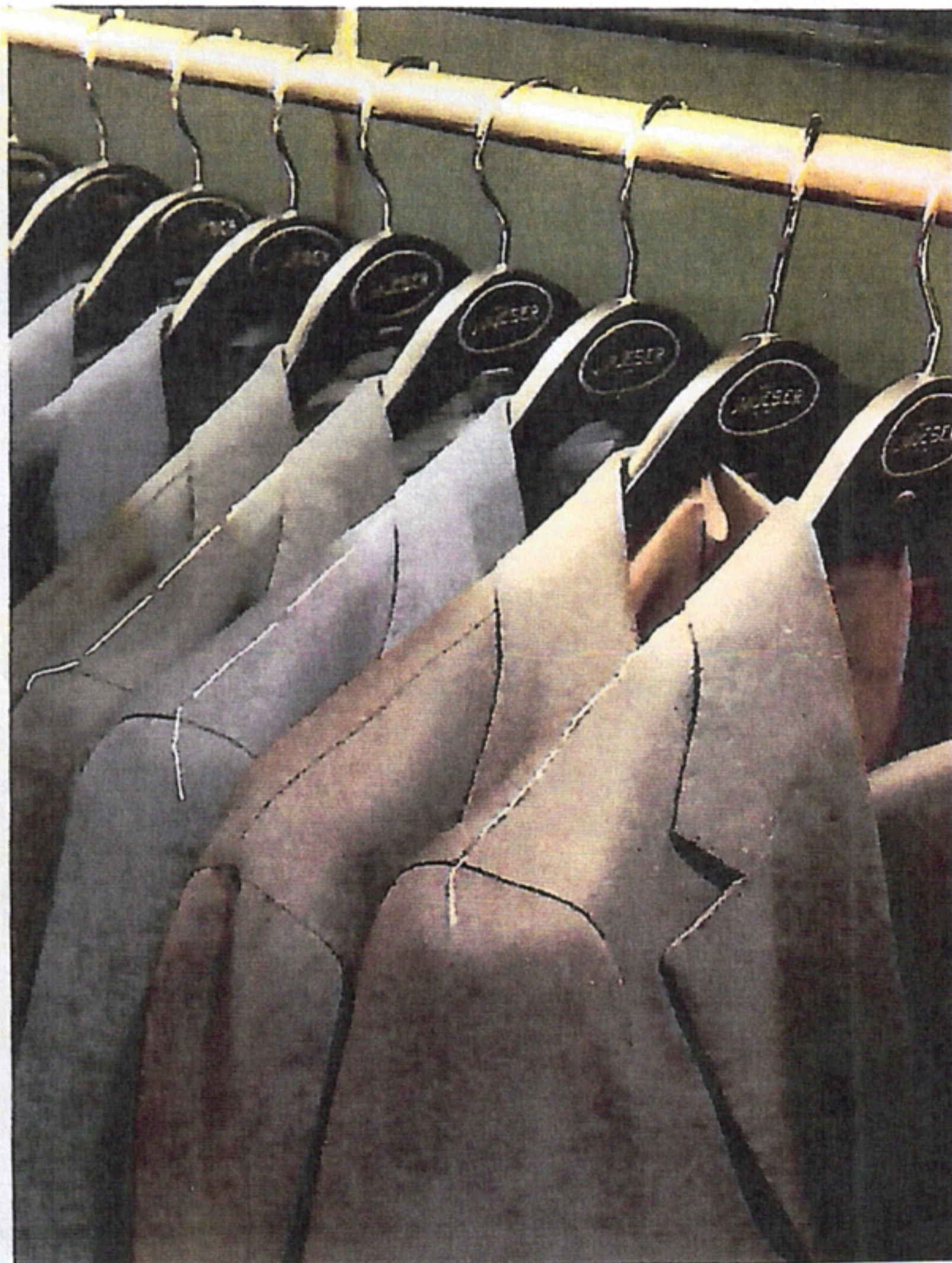
BY: *Helen Ellis*

MY HUSBAND, A BORN-AND-RAISED New Yorker, tells me, a Southern lady who has lived in Manhattan for more than thirty years: "You go to book readings, museums, the opera. You're more of a New Yorker than I am. I don't like to do any of those things."

This is true. When my husband "takes me to the theater," he walks me from our Upper East Side apartment to Times Square, treats me to lunch, and then deposits me at the theater door. This works out well for us because he doesn't have to sit through "a bunch of people talking or moving around" (a.k.a. dancing), and I don't have to sit beside him as he stewes about the money we spent on his ticket. All my husband needs is Central

Park and coffee shops between East Sixty-Ninth and Seventy-Seventh Streets. But the longer I live here, the more I want to experience.

I was raised in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, by a Yazoo City, Mississippi, mama who took me to local productions (and encouraged me to try out for a role as a von Trapp child with my rendition of Kenny Rogers's "The Gambler"), the Kentuck Festival of the Arts (where she collected ceramic goblets and I made thumbprint mice), the public library (where she got me a library card before I could read), and potlucks (where she brought the coffee urn). Mama taught me to participate, to appreciate what's around me, but more so to celebrate people who create, curate, and welcome me in.



My friend and fellow Alabama writer Martin Wilson (who considers himself a New Yorker because he can now “turn a blind eye to crazy”) and I go art gallery hopping downtown. Galleries have the reputation of being snooty—and these two that I’m going to suggest *sound* snooty—but the folks at the front desks will walk you through their exhibits with a parent’s macaroni-portrait pride. To see Athens, Georgia, resident Holly Coulis’s abstract lemons and cats, visit Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery. To admire Jeff Canham’s house-plant sculptures, trek over to Hashimoto Contemporary (when I bought one of his wooden snails, the gallerist threw in two of his cigarette objets d’art for Martin and me to pretend to smoke).

To this day, I haven’t let go of my chicken-fried steak tastes, and when I miss the flavors of the South, I sidle up to the red-and-white-oilcloth tables at the West Village’s Cowgirl Hall of Fame (now Cowgirl NYC, but I have eaten there since the nineties and will always call it by its full birth name). Frito pie, collard greens, and black-eyed-peasalsa—yes, you’ve had all of this before, but when you’re a stranger in a strange land, it feels good to break the ice over a mason jar margarita.

After lunch, I like to stroll below Union Square and slip into one-room specialty boutiques that spit in the face of technology. This past holiday season, the collage artist John Derian’s shops beat out Bergdorf Goodman’s seventh-floor Christmas room as my favorite place for ornament ogling. The rest of the year, Derian’s three stores in a row on East Second Street offer an emporium of hostess gifts *to the gods*. If you can dream it, they can decoupage it: round plates, oval plates, cake plates, switch plates, lamps, coasters, and enough paperweights to hold down a circus tent. There are also porcelain honeydews and embroidered chick-

ens. There are foot brushes and stromboli-scented erasers. There are settees, there are poufs. Every time I visit, I buy five-dollar matchboxes. The last time I was there, I snagged vintage paint-by-number postcards. I regret not buying marble grapes and a green metal floor lamp. And I’d very much like to meet the customer who can’t live without the \$1,200 nineteenth-century French leech jars.

A stroll away, Casey Rubber Stamps sells nothing but ink pads and gazillions of wood-handle stamps, of which I own thirty-eight including a pigeon, and two Victorian children who stand atop a label that reads, SWEET AND CLEAN. Farther west, Greenwich Letterpress vends hand-cut cards and scratch-and-sniff stickers. It’s where I ordered a custom notepad that reads, ENJOYABLE and features images of a few things I find enjoyable: Ouija boards, kittens, and Dustin Hoffman dressed as Dorothy Michaels in *Tootsie*.

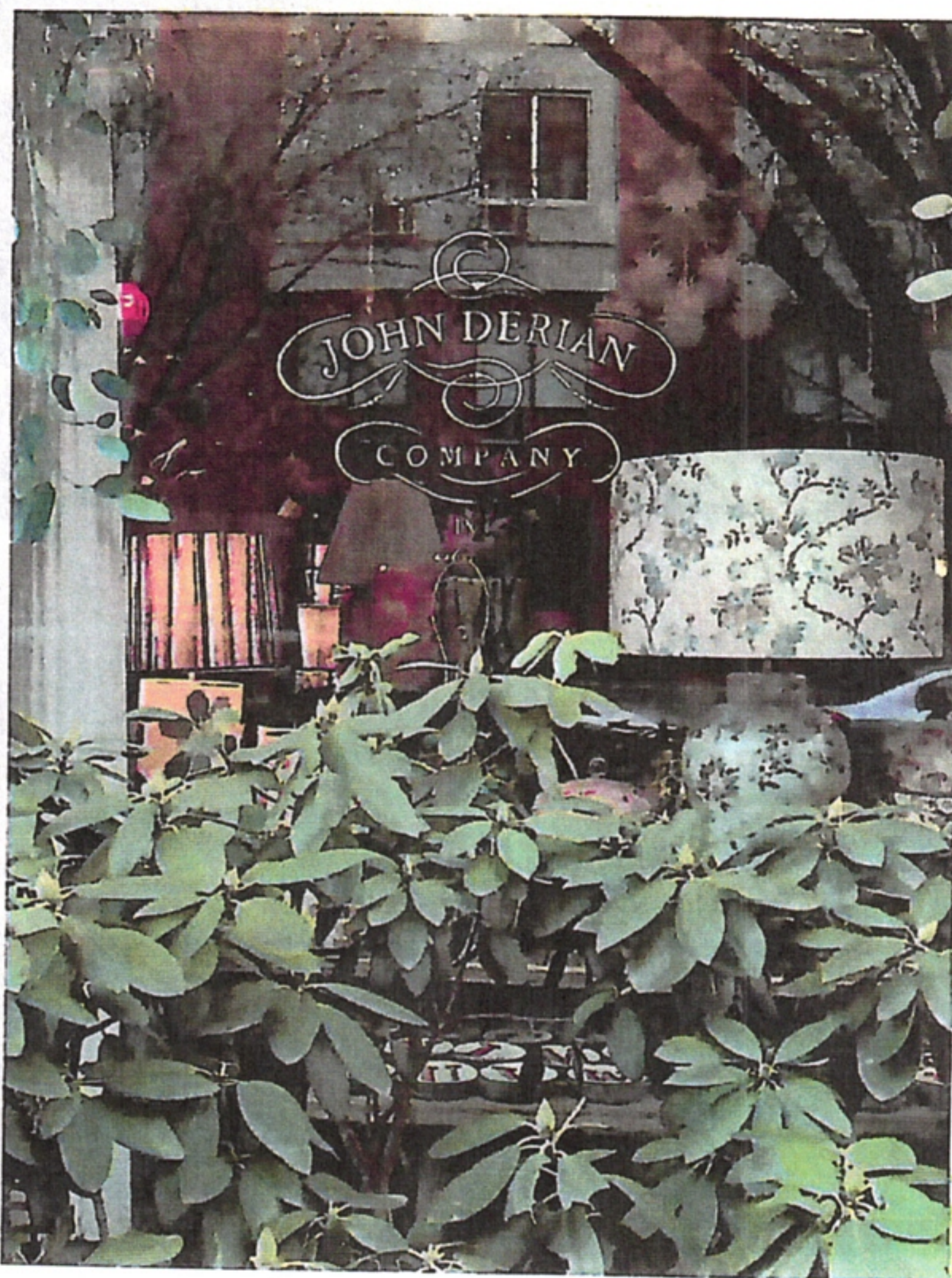
My husband asks me, “Is this a guide for women?”

“No,” I say.

“Good,” he says, “because on the same block as Greenwich Letterpress is J. Mueser, the hottest men’s tailoring place right now.”

He discovered this bevy of button-downs while I browsed the letterpress shop. We were on our way to Houston Street, where my husband has taken me on day dates since we first met. His idea of romance is Arturo’s Coal Oven Pizza—where the piano player and pepperoni are always authentic—followed by Film Forum, where we see “classic” New York City movies like *Rosemary’s Baby*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Taking Off*, and *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*. See there: small restaurant, small theater, small talk, big fun. He wooed me, a woman who loves New York with every beat of her Southern heart.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADDIE JUELL



From far left: Frito pie, collard greens, and a margarita at Cowgirl NYC; J. Mueser’s hand-tailored suits; Greenwich Letterpress; work by Holly Coulis in the Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery; John Derian Company on East Second Street.