

The Room

The rent-free room on West 74th street came with strings attached. I had to work a double shift in the lobby every Friday at three in the afternoon, behind the gray marble counter and provide “security” until seven the following morning. The twelve story pre-war building had once been a fairly snazzy hotel, with maids, bellhops, a tailor, the whole shot, even a house detective. Imagine the Marx Brothers careening down the halls and you’ve got the picture.

By the time I arrived in 1985, it had become a rather rundown apartment building. A poorly maintained collection of apartments, with no amenities to speak of, just a dark basement laundry room, and a rotation of security guys nodding off in the lobby 24/7. In exchange for my all-night double shift I lived rent-free in one of the former maids rooms at the end of a dead-end hallway on the second floor. The room was small but felt palatial compared with my previous residence.

I had been a guest of the State of New York at the Woodbourne Correctional facility for three years. I was known as 81A2784. The 81 was the year of my incarceration, the A was for the type of felony and the numbers were just numbers. But I served my time and now I could leave my tiny room anytime I wished. I had a hot plate for making espresso and ate out most nights.

I was also the house painter and plasterer by day, pushing my tools and materials in a pilfered shopping cart throughout the building. I was given a punch list every week with apartments that needed my attention. Not a bad gig. I had rescued the teenage son of the building’s owner from a mugging late one night on upper Broadway and the job was kind of a thank you gift. They knew about my time served but didn’t care. I was a damn good painter.

The real privilege of my job was the opportunity to get inside the apartments and get an up close look at lives of quiet, and not so quiet, desperation. People and their habits have always interested me. It was all “grist for the mill” as my late mother used to say.

Most people feel secure in the privacy of their homes and behave accordingly. Nude vacuuming comes to mind. No one thinks they have anything to hide, but they do. Given my easy access with a big ring of pass keys, a dishonest person could find ways to greatly benefit themselves. But that is not me. Not anymore.

Freddy the Plumber, Leo the Locksmith, Nate the Super, and all the other security guys used an apartment number only system for identifying the tenants. For some reason they never referred to them by name, but I had my own secret ID system based on their type of work. Apartment 409 was the Austrian Wig Maker for The Metropolitan Opera. Number 640 was the Dope Crazy Film Editor. The small, elderly man in a dusty fedora and a black raincoat worn gray at the shoulders passing through the lobby twice a day was number 305, the Gloomy Accountant. Having been inside his one bedroom apartment to patch and paint, I knew that his home was crammed salon style with small sailboat paintings in vibrant, tropical colors. The old gentleman was quite proud of his work, giggling as he rushed about showing me the seascapes one by one as I finished up and gathered my tools. They were dreadful paintings, but I smiled and nodded, asking if he had been a sailor. He blinked twice and slowly replaced the last canvas on its hook. He then looked at me as if trying to decide if I was mentally deficient in some way and the gallery tour was suddenly over. He never acknowledged me again, in the lobby, the street or anywhere else.

The far end of the twelfth floor hallway had a powerful and curious odor. It instantly brought back uncomfortable memories of the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus I was taken to as a child. On one of the lower levels of the old Madison Square Garden was a side-show complete with bearded ladies, strong men and assorted freaks. The unfortunate people on display were appallingly sad and frightening to me. But the worst part was the smell, an overpowering odor that for years I associated with human deformity, disease and madness. Years later, as a young adult I learned that the smell was actually from the caged animals all stacked together, just out of sight from the loud and bizarre side-show.

This exact odor greeted anyone stepping off the elevator at the top floor. It came from apartment 1212 at the end of the hall. The source was a tiny Capuchin monkey belonging to an elderly Italian couple, Frank and Louise. The monkey threw a fit the first time I showed up to do some painting, screeching and hurling itself against the side of its cage near the windows. Frank and Louise tried to calm it by cooing and pleading,

“Be nice to Phil he’s *Eye-talian!*”

It calmed him somewhat and Louise announced she would make us all some lunch and the raging monkey instantly settled down, his tiny hands folded in his lap, eyelashes fluttering. I began to move some furniture away from the walls and lay out my drop cloths, keeping my distance from the monkey. Frank was fully involved with an afternoon Mets game on his 12 inch black and white Zenith. The pre-cable reception was poor but Frank’s tin foil extensions on the antenna made it almost watchable. He was even white-knuckling the plastic covered arms of his Lazy-Boy. I moved toward the kitchenette to fill a pail with water but Louise stopped me and offered me something on a single paper towel as if it was the Holy Communion. I held it carefully to keep the three Ritz crackers from tumbling to the floor. Each one was crowned with a dollop of deviled ham. Louise laid Frank’s paper towel on his lap and Frank thanked her

without taking his eyes off a close-up of Lenny Dykstra dribbling tobacco juice from his bulging cheek. I stood where I was, amazed as Louise brought another three crackers to the monkey who began to nibble at them one at a time like tiny pizzas. I wadded up mine in the paper towel and jammed it into my painter's coveralls just as Louise turned around.

“Oooh, you liked it, didn't you?”

“Yes, Ma'am, I sure did.”

Louise creased her face into a benevolent smile and patted my arm as she headed for the sink. The monkey was glaring at me, holding his last cracker over his head. He slipped his arm outside the wire cage and frisbeed the cracker across the room where it stuck, deviled ham down, on the back of Frank's sweater. Wrapped up in the game, Frank didn't even notice. I went about my business as Louise settled in at the kitchen table to clip coupons.

The next day I found out just how good an arm that monkey had. I stepped off the elevator to find both Frank and Louise waiting to ride down.

“The door's open, Phil, just let yourself in”, Louise chirped brightly. “We're going to the store.”

“It's okay if I go in alone?”

“Sure, sure, we told him you were coming,” barked Frank.

The elevator doors closed and they were gone. I pushed open their apartment door very slowly with my toe and peeked inside. The monkey glanced my way and returned to jerking off in the corner of his cage. After setting up my tarps and ladder, I began to paint the crown molding I'd sanded and primed the day before. Working from the entry along the living room

wall toward the windows took me closer and closer to the monkey. He paid me no mind even as I adjusted my ladder right next to his cage. Everything was cool. I set my bucket and brush on an end table and bent over to wipe up a drop of paint from the floor with a rag. The monkey made his move. He grabbed my brush and whipped it sidearm out the open window. We both watched it spinning in the sunlight, landing God knows where on the roof of the building next door. It was an expensive, brand new, 2-inch Purdy sash brush with boars hair bristles. The monkey looked up at me, his mouth a tiny “O” of fake surprise. I cursed him out loud.

“Fuck you, monkey!”

As I left to retrieve my brush he was laughing and humping himself.

I hustled downstairs and across the street. I knew the doorman and he buzzed me in. I took the freight elevator all the way up.

I shouldered open the roof door, skirting fresh patches of tar here and there. All I had to do was follow the Navajo White skid marks across the roof and past the water tank enclosure. My brush had come to a stop under someone’s lawn chair. The owner was stretched out on it sunbathing. She was a redhead and wore nothing but Ray Bans and a Sony Walkman. She was covered with a lovely dusting of tiny freckles, a towel rolled beneath her head, her shorts and t-shirt under the chair. My brush lay inches away. I could faintly hear a tiny Al Green pleading for love from her headphones.

I couldn’t simply crawl under the chair and I didn’t want to scare her to death, so I stood there debating what to do. She turned her head a half-inch toward me, lifting off her headphones, and asked slowly,

“May I help you with something?”

(She was a cool customer indeed.) My voice came out dry as sandpaper,

“I came up for my paintbrush, it’s under your chair.”

She tilted the Ray Bans up (nice, big brown eyes) and leaned over to peer at the brush.

“And how did your brush arrive under my chair?”

“Well, you would never believe it, really.”

“Come on, try me. This *is* New York after all.”

“No, seriously, it’s incredibly stupid.”

“Spill it buster, I want to know!”

“Okay, I’m trying to paint an apartment across the street and the people have a crazy monkey and when I wasn’t looking he whipped my new brush out the window.”

She smiled slowly and looked at me like I was both a liar and an idiot.

“That’s good, that’s really good. What’s your name, painter man and what’s your game?”

“I’m Phil.” “No game at all.”

She stood up (a perfect five foot five) and moved the chair aside with her left foot.

“I’m Marsha.”

We shook hands.

“Are you dressing me in your mind, Phil?”

“Am I what?”

“If you’re wondering how I look with clothes on, meet me at the P&G around eight o'clock.

I did as she suggested and she looked just fine with her clothes on. The new brush was a goner, but I made a mental note to thank the monkey anyway.

The P&G was loud that night and I did my best to ignore the looks I was getting from some clowns I knew at the bar. Marsha looked bigger with her clothes on but just as lovely and she had a confident air that I found very sexy. She smiled at me like she was glad to be there and after our meal she drained her final pint of Bass Ale.

“I want to see your room.”

“Its tiny, it’s nothing, it’s just a room.”

“If it’s where you live, I want to see it.”

The last person to enter my room had been old Leo the locksmith who picked the lock when I lost my key. That was over a year ago. I had a good ale buzz and threw caution to the wind.

“Okay, what the lady wants, the lady gets!”

I paid the tab on our way out and we both swayed a bit rounding the corner to my building. Ronald the night man buzzed us in and stood up behind the marble desk. I had forgotten how tall he was. I waved to him and tried to steer Marsha to the back stairs but she broke away and approached Ronald with her hand out.

“Hi, I’m Marsha.”

Ronald mumbled something that was probably his name but I never understood a thing he said. He had the regal bearing of an African king or perhaps the actor Paul Robeson, but the speech issue and his left eye that moved in its own wild circular orbit made him a shy man.

Marsha continued unfazed.

“It’s really nice to meet you, Ronald. I’ll see you around!”

We hauled ourselves up the stairs to the back hallway and I pointed out the bathroom as we passed it. I unlocked my door and paused to say something stupid about the disarray but Marsha shoved me inside right onto the bed and pulled the door shut.

“I can get a little loud sometimes,” she warned, pulling her sweater over her head, then leapt on me like a kid at a pillow fight. We kissed hard, our breath reeking of onion rings, but it didn’t matter one bit.

I have learned that when I’m covered with sweat nothing beats a cool late night breeze from the airshaft outside my single window. I had dozed off and slowly realized I was alone. I heard the toilet flush down the hall and for no good reason decided to feign sleep just as Marsha stepped back into the room. She moved soundlessly, even in the pitch dark. I heard a Zippo lighter flick open, and from the light of the flame, saw that she was crouched over my milk crate of record albums.

I wondered if it was my lighter, the one I lost two months ago.

“Hey Phil, you got any Hank Snow?”

“You mean the old rockabilly guy?”

“The one and only.”

“I doubt it, that’s mostly jazz. Dexter Gordon, Monk.”

I reached for the gooseneck lamp and switched it on. Marsha snapped the lighter shut.

“Is that your lighter?” I asked.

She tossed it into the air and caught it behind her back.

“Its mine now, found it under the tub in your bathroom.”

She crawled onto the bed and looked at me sideways.

“How come you don’t have a record player?”

“Haven’t gotten around to it.”

“I know where I can get you a good one, just let me know.”

“Okay, I will.”

The light in the air shaft was growing soft and rosy as Marsha pulled on her jeans and sweater. That made it about 6 am. She laced up her red high top Keds, put her fists on her hips and gave me a wicked grin.

“Aren’t you going to see me to the door, Paint Man?”

Still lying on the futon, I returned the grin.

“Just turn around, it’s right behind you.”

Marsha blew me a kiss, opened the door and flipped me off on the way out, with a sultry taunt.

“You know where to find me.”

I yawned and stretched, ready for another hour of sleep. As I drifted off I remembered that the cons used to call high top sneakers “felony shoes.”

Later that morning I put on the hotplate and waited for the espresso maker to start hissing and looked around my room. There was no logical place to put a turntable and an amplifier. I would have to rig up some shelves low enough to reach the dials but high enough not to bump my head on it. I got tired just thinking about it and looked up at the photo of Dexter Gordon blowing his tenor sax at the Montmartre Club in Copenhagen. Maybe I could get one of those little tape players like Marsha had and listen while I worked.

The next few days were insanely busy. Apartment 611, The Obese IBM Secretary, had died in her tub while the water was running. It ran down the walls all the way to 511, 411 and 311 before anyone knew what was happening. Two guys from Walter B. Cooke used the freight elevator to roll her out through the lobby leaving a trail of bath water that dripped from the black body bag. I spent three days just opening up walls so they would air out before I could make repairs. I had some down time and I used it to jog around the reservoir in Central Park. Coming back in the rain one afternoon I spotted two guys in cheap sport coats talking with Nate the Super in the lobby. One was in a wheelchair. Cops, both of them. Old habits die hard and I turned on my heels and went back out into the rain until they left the building. I avoided the police whenever possible. Sure enough, they got into a double-parked brown Crown Vic. The tall Black cop took the folded up wheelchair and shoved it in the trunk. Then they drove up Broadway.

The story was that someone had picked the locks on all the washers and driers in the basement laundry room and made off with a heavy load of coins. With over one hundred tenants using them, there would be a wildfire of accusations and finger pointing. I planned to stay out of it.

I stripped off my rain soaked sweats in the bathroom and hung them over the tub. I padded naked down the hall to my room and discovered a paper shopping bag hanging on the doorknob. I tossed it on the bed and finished toweling off. In it was a small flat square, about 10 by 12 inches, gift wrapped in red paper and tied with a silver bow. Written on it was a note, "For the Painter Man." I tore off the wrapping and laid it back down on the bed. It was an oil painting of a pair of sailboats leaning hard to port on a windswept harbor beneath purple mountains and electric green palm trees. I knew where there were nearly forty paintings just like it. I sat on the

bed for quite a while wondering what to do. My moral compass was relatively new and unused but I let it point the way.

The doorman buzzed me into the lobby on 75th street. He was happy to see me, or at least glad for some company since the Mets game had been rained out. He even turned off his transistor radio as I approached his desk.

“Phil, how you doing man?”

“Not bad Chico, how about you?”

“Excellent my friend, excellent!”

“I need to find someone in the building, can you help me?”

“Sure man, just give me a name.”

He flipped open a thick directory and waited.

“I only have a first name, it’s Marsha.”

He laughed and said,

“You mean Marshall with two “els” he’s a young maricon from Texas who don’t like Puerto Ricans!”

“No, that wouldn’t be it. I’m looking for a girl.”

“No, we got no Marsha, maybe she live with somebody else, try number 7B that’s Mr. Simon, go ahead and take the freight.”

I took it and went right to the roof instead and stepped outside. It had stopped raining and sunlight slashed down through the clouds like Klieg lights at a Hollywood premier. I walked to where I met Marsha. There was no lawn chair and the paint marks from my brush had been washed away. I slowly walked the perimeter of the roof gazing out at the enormous and beautiful city that was my home. It sparkled in the fresh air. Somewhere out there was a girl

with my lighter in her pocket. That was okay. Maybe I got off easy. I stopped to look over at my building and spotted the monkey curled up in the one corner of his cage that was being warmed by the sun. I don't know if he saw me, but I waved anyway and wished I could set him free.