

Edward Hopper Triptych

Early Sunday Morning

I know you can't see the doors to the second floor apartments in that painting. That does not mean they were not there. They are. In fact, there are two doors; they're at the ends of the building, on the sides. It's probably some fire regulation, having two doors in case of emergencies.

When you get to the top of the stairs, you'll see the doors to the apartment running down the hall. There's a worn carpet, pretty bare in spots. In a couple of places, it's even lifted out from under the molding. The super told me, "That carpet was new with the building," but I don't think anyone believes him. It was probably old to begin with. Only the four corner units have a second bedroom and get some cross ventilation. You can guess how hot it gets in the others later in the day. Of course, Hopper wouldn't know; he doesn't live there. But he could guess. Just look at that white light.

He must have just walked up Seventh Avenue slumming early some Sunday morning. Nobody was on the street; they were all sleeping. He should have known he was in a working class neighborhood. Those who can were out partying Saturday night. We're only six blocks across town from McSorley's Ale House. It was probably easier for Hopper to fill the canvas with the

light instead of people anyhow. Maybe he thought that having people in a picture wasn't necessary for art.

Or maybe he meant something else like, "How nice it is now. It's peaceful and quiet with all the people behind those curtains asleep."

Well, I'm one of them. Our apartment is on the backside of the hall in that building. It looks out onto the alley. Probably it would line up with the barbershop pole you can see out there on the sidewalk. I never really tried to measure. It is not such a big deal. If you said your rent should be less on the alley side, the landlord would reply, "Nah, it's quieter there at night." Never mind all the banging of the garbage cans early in the morning. Yeh, and there's the delivery trucks with the drivers whipping up the metal tailgates and slamming them down again after unloading. I suppose it's all part of living in New York.

If your apartment looked out over the street the super would tell you, you'd just complain of the noise during the day. The wise-ass would say, "You want quiet; you should move out to the country; go milk some cows." If there weren't a depression going on you could bet the landlord would have tried to raise the rent, "You're now living in a very famous apartment, gonna have to raise your rent." Well thank you now, Mr. Edward Hopper.

Boring. I've heard lots of people saying how boring that painting is. "You really live there?" No. I've a favorite park bench up there around 80th Street off Fifth Avenue.

So, take a look at that street. Good thing I know where I live. The street could be anywhere. You don't see any street signs, do you? Unreal. Where's the dog poop, trash at the curb, or some blown paper in the doorways? Don't see any, huh? Yeh, but I know my home when I see it, even without the garbage. The missus and me been living there eight years come June.

If you're asking -- no, we didn't move in after getting married at some fancy June wedding. I got the license and we took the bus down to the Court House. My brother and Gayle's sister met us there. Simple ceremony. We weren't young chickens then. We don't look it either. Heck, New York life ain't easy. But we make do. Moving into that apartment was all the honeymoon we got. Heck, we both got to work just to make do. Especially now. Lucky we got jobs at all.

Don't misunderstand me. We get our happy times just like other people. I make sure we take the train out to the beach in Coney Island a couple of times a summer on a Sunday. I work for the subways so get some free passes. Save a nickel, save a dime. You know how that goes.

Gayle, she works at one of those fancy hotels. Cleaning and picking up rooms for the rich. She makes more in tips than salary. We don't complain. It's steady work, which is more than some have now. She said I married her for how she squares the sheets and does the turndowns. Well, maybe she's right. But it does get me mad sometimes. I tell her I never planned on living in a hotel room. Take a look out on Hopper's street. Remember, no papers and everything else seems lifeless. Could be some stage set after closing with all the bright lights left on. Damned if that barber pole doesn't look out of whack. If I tell Gayle about it, she'd go down and straighten

it up.

As for that hydrant, I can tell you I know one person that would love to piss on it. If the street were deserted at 3 AM when we were coming home, I'd make like a dog and then climb those stairs in comfort. Heck, a couple of times I knew I wouldn't make it. I went back in the alley and pissed against the damned building. Anyone up at that hour would understand. I just made sure it wasn't under my window or Charlie's. His apartment is two down from mine, on the street side. We guessed that the windows in the left of the picture are his. Charlie said, "Good thing I didn't hang my boxers out to dry when that guy painted his picture. I wouldn't want people to remember me as 'that boxer man'." I told Charlie I didn't think Hopper was that kind of guy.

Gayle doesn't approve of my pissing. Said I just should not drink so much beer. Hey, I'm a working man and had to make up for lost time because of Prohibition. Trust me, if I couldn't drink I never would have gotten married. The little woman knows that. You wouldn't want to be around me if I had to be dry again, not that I was back then, only "officially."

You ever think that maybe Hopper made this eerie lifeless painting because he couldn't get a drink. Maybe he was on the wagon, couldn't face people dry, and was a bit shy socially. Me, you put a drink in my hands and I can chat up the Pope. Gayle sometimes complains about that too.

Second time I went to see that painting I saw some bearded guy staring at it for twenty

minutes. I went up to him and said, "Hey, you know I live in that building?" He almost jumped out of his skin. If he had been in that barbershop getting a haircut, he'd have popped himself out of the barber chair right into the street. Good thing he wasn't getting a shave. Otherwise, the razor would have cut clean through his neck. Anyway, he stared down his nose at me and said, "You bother me again and I'll call the guards."

Now a dozen years later Hopper paints that Nighthawks thing with the diner. Somehow, he got me in there trying to have a quiet cup of coffee and read the paper. He should have stuck to leaving people out. It would be a happier picture if he had.

Nighthawks

I seem to remember telling you that that Hopper guy caught me with my back turned in that diner. He came up Seventh Avenue a bunch of years after he painted that morning picture. This time it was late at night. I was sitting in that diner having a cup of coffee. I was working up the courage to go upstairs. Me and Gayle were having some marital trouble. What can you do? Life certainly gives you some hard knocks. Put it in perspective; my buddy told me, "There's a war on." I suppose so. Lucky that I was too old to go over there and kick the Kraut's ass. With my luck, if I went they'd probably send me right back in a box. So now, I work a job and a half down in the subway.

It's been kind of quiet here in Knickerbocker's City. As if everyone is scared we won't whip that Hun. I'm not worried. And we'll soon take care of them Japs. But what we did to them out in California was downright un-American. No one asked me though. Besides, I got my own problems. You could have guessed we'd do something like that with them Japanese. Just like what happened with the Indians -- take away their land when they're not looking. I bet there're some "native" Californians making big bucks with some beachfront property or some prime city real estate, telling people how they "liberated it from the Japanese." We'll see what happens when the war is over.

Gayle's also working overtime. Says her sister is going to get her a job in a manufacturing plant upstate. Pay would be a lot better than what's she's making now even with the overtime in that hotel. She plans to become a regular Rose' the Riveter. That's what most of our fighting's been about. I tell her a woman's place is by her man. Always has been and always will be.

I had to get a second cup of coffee. I just didn't want to go upstairs and argue again about the same old things. I just think she's getting tired of me. Ten years difference in age is showing. I'm going to be 48. All the stubble on my face is coming out grey. Gayle, she's still firm and flexible from all that house cleaning and bending over. I used to tease her about the old f & f and it wasn't *firm and flexible* – but I was younger then, more virile as they say. I think that's what she really wants – two f & f's every night. Did you figure it out? If not, it's *fondle and fuck*; I just don't know if they'd let me write that here. Nah, I don't think it's the job or the money. But try to get a woman to say that even in these modern times.

You know, I saw that other couple across the counter from me. They were there when I came in and she looked rather upset. I know it's not nice but heck; the other fellow's problems always make yours seem easy. From what I heard them saying, I may have it easy.

You thought ten years is a big difference between me and Gayle. Well let me tell you that ten thousand miles is even a bigger difference. I heard the young lady say something about her husband fighting in the Pacific somewhere and how she hasn't heard from him in a long time. That's when she wiped a tear from her eye. The guy next to her reached over and held her hand. He told her not to worry. Well that's easy for him to say, ain't it?

Then it turns out that it's his own brother, which would make this young lady his sister-in-law. It gets more interesting still. He seems to try to comfort her. Again, he tells her not to worry. If Rob comes back, she could get a divorce. She should know that he'd marry her "at the drop of a hat." Really, I heard him say that and even lift his grey hat up from his head.

And then, when he offered to get her something to eat, she says, "No. You know I'm having trouble keeping food down now." Oh boy, what did I tell you about other people's problems? Yeh, this guy's some sport. I hear him muttering out of the side of his mouth, "Rob was home on leave, wasn't he? So the kid can be his. I mean, if he does come back and you don't want to get divorced. He's my kid brother, the baby should look like him any which way." OK. This is a *really nice* guy, if you get my drift. All heart, so he didn't go, 4-F, because of his bum leg. It doesn't seem as if that other leg was bum. He really was an f-Fer. Different "f's" from what I

had in mind that other moment.

So anyway, I take out my paper and make believe that I'm doing some kind of puzzle. I nod to the counterman that a little refresh on the coffee wouldn't hurt none. So he comes over with the pot and starts chatting me up. Like haven't I heard all his baseball talk a dozen times over with as many cups of coffee. If you looked like you were a Yankee fan, real prosperous, he would start saying, "Yes, sir, those Yankees ran away with it again. Those Senators couldn't even see their heels, back 13 ½ games. No contest there. The Yanks just walked away with the Series too."

Another time this guy comes in and asks for a cup of coffee. He had a heavy Brooklyn accent. I was up to my ears in "dems and doses." He was just asking for a roll and a cuppa. And our white jacketed and white hatted friend behind the counter comes up with, "Yeh, sad about those Dodgers. Leo had it tough. So many of his players drafted into the Army. But, trust me, dem bums will be back." Talk about trying to sound Brooklyn here in lower Manhattan. So give me a break, yeh, "back." How much farther back can you get than 23 and ½ games??

Then I get this other cup of coffee and this good brother finally shuts up. I look over the top of the paper to see what's going to happen next around the counter. The hero must have signaled for the bill since the young lady is about to pat her lips dry. He's no longer holding her hand. Blondie is looking for his order pad behind the counter and I've missed the tail end of their conversation. Now I guess I'll have to go up and deal with Gayle. Talk about hurricane winds.

Now I wouldn't want you to think I'm making all of this up. In case you didn't notice, that building across from the diner has the same window ledges as mine. You saw it in that Sunday AM thing. Go look if you don't trust me. You'd be able to see the hydrant or the barber pole but it was probably too dark for Hopper to get those details in this painting.

Morning in a City

Well one way I can get even with Frank is to pose for this Hopper painter before I leave for Schenectady. Rose' the Riveter I'm not, but neither am I Frank's slave. He's getting too old anyhow. I was glad when my sister called and said the job was still waiting for me. It's not such a big deal if I stand here naked. I can see our building across the street. It's been changed a little since that first painting. Everything changes with time. Just ask me. Of course, our apartment is around back. Frank couldn't see me anyhow since he's at work down in the subway. That's the only way I could get out of the house with my things. Mr. Hopper was nice enough to help. We were just lucky that they had a room available here across the street.

I told Mr. Hopper that I'd like to shower and he could go downstairs and grab a bite to eat at the diner. Maybe they would even give him a free lunch seeing how his painting is pretty famous. Too bad Frank's in that picture. But I guess if he weren't, I never would have gotten to know Mr. Hopper. That would have been a shame.

Mr. Hopper is bringing up my meals so I won't have to go outside in case any of our neighbors come by. I left Frank a note saying that I was going up to my sister and nothing could change my mind. We've argued enough so that he knows if I don't write or otherwise in six months that never would be too soon. What's over is over. I told him I didn't think of this as a trial separation. After 12 years, I should know, it's no longer working.

Anyhow, Mr. Hopper wanted the light just right on our building. Pretty close to noon. From the colors, you wouldn't think it's our place. I think he started with my hair and then went from there. The hair is just right, the color at least. All those other colors just followed. But in real life, my hair has more of a sheen and bounce. It's my best feature. All my friends have always told me that. However, he's the artist and is welcome, I'm sure, to change things as he wants. Too bad, I can't do that in my life, a quick paint over so to speak. Now that would be great.

I guess he caught the light just right. The walls of the room certainly brightened up. And he painted out the picture on the wall alongside the bed. I guess that's what they call artistic freedom. He also brightened up our apartment building. It really is that rose shade in his Sunday Morning picture. Anyhow, I guess since the sun is so yellowish you could see it on the walls outside. All that light bounced in and mottled the walls. Now that I look, maybe even the sunlight coming through the yellow curtains helped in the painting.

Mr. Hopper was kind to me. I was glad he kept me around for a few days. The weather helped

too. A few extra warm days at the end of May. He kept the window open and if it had been cold, I could have hung that towel on my nipples. The cold sometimes causes my breasts to shrink about the nipples and then the nipples pop out some more. Anyway, you can see how firm I am even at almost 40. I like my body.

I know Frank likes my body. Mr. Hopper also tells me I'm a beautiful woman. Yes, the colors do make me look edible. I just wish that the look Mr. Hopper put on my face appeared more hopeful and not so pained. We talked as I stood there and Mr. Hopper asked what I was thinking of.

I said I guess it was about leaving New York City and maybe resettling in upstate near my sister. He said, "Those are tough decisions. You always wonder if you did the right thing." I admit it; I was a little troubled. It's not as if Frank was bad for me, it's more like he's no longer so good.

While I was standing there with the towel in front of me, I was thinking back about some of the good and bad times Frank and I had. Nothing was ever really bad but then not so much was really ever good. It seemed mostly about getting up, going to work, picking up some food to eat; then maybe a walk around the block and it was time for bed. We did have the occasional weekend out at the Trans-Lux. The newsreels with those reports from the fronts were not very cheerful. I know we had to be frugal. Maybe it was still that depression mentality, but I thought that there had to be more to life than just this.

We couldn't seem to have kids. I know we could have gotten by. Maybe not in New York City, but my sister always said things were easier upstate. Frank said it was just as well we didn't have kids. "Cannon fodder," he'd mutter whenever the conversation came around to the war and why have children. There was no arguing with him so maybe it was just as well I couldn't conceive. My sister has two kids and they're doing OK upstate. They have a small house and so what if they don't take summer vacations in Europe. Who'd want to go there now anyhow? She says she's happy enough watching her kids grow up.

I know it's sort of artistic to have that white window ledge lead to the white towel in front of my privates and then to that white stripped bed. The bed looks so lifeless. Like it has given up on having any further chance at pleasure. I don't know. I'm hoping I can start over again upstate. Maybe I won't ask for a divorce right away. I guess if Frank comes up after me nicely, then maybe we can start again up there away from the city. He is a young forty even he if does turn 50 later this year. I mean, he's strong; he's hardly ever been sick. He doesn't have much of a middle-aged spread even if he's flappy about his chin and jaw. I guess he could grow a beard as long as it didn't make him look like a communist.

I did suggest to Mr. Hopper that he should paint a red flag in front of my privates. It would be a bold statement. It would make me feel more like a free woman. You know, like a red flag in front of a charging bull. I don't have to paint that picture, do I? The red would complement my hair. Mr. Hopper is the artist; he could fix the color so it wouldn't clash at all. However, he thought that white would go better. "Besides," he said, "that's the color of the hotel towel.

Why change it?"

I just thought that the white towel was too much like a flag of surrender. However, he's the artist. He said he'd only need me for another day. Then he'd take me in a taxi to the midtown bus terminal and make sure I was safely on the bus up to Schenectady. He even said he would pay for the ticket and make sure I'd have a nice luncheon basket for the trip. He's really such a nice man.

So, just one more day. I hope the good weather holds out so he can get the kind of light he wants. I'm taking along two of Mrs. Pearl Buck's books to read on the bus. The Good Earth, I've already read that one twice and The Promise. Frank just bought me a used copy. That was nice of him. Oh well, just one more day. I still wish that Mr. Hopper would paint that towel red. But he's the artist.

Ed. Note. Edward Hopper (1882-1967) was a prominent painter, printmaker and illustrator. He used only his wife as a nude model. It is Jo Hopper in the *Morning in a City* painting. The above monologue is symptomatic of the depression and delusion Gayle was going through at that time. All three paintings can be found on the internet.