

## Inside Out - A Hopper Triptych -

Edward Hopper (1882-1967) was a prominent American painter, printmaker and illustrator.

### Early Sunday Morning (1930)\*

I keep coming back to that picture, the silent one, the one with the hydrant and barber pole. You don't see many of those barber poles now. There were lots of them when I was a kid, even into the war. My memory isn't all that good now. I was born before this century crept in. It's a pretty safe bet I'll be gone before it ends. I didn't see that painting right away you know. Ha, for sure I didn't buy it. And what would a guy like me be doing in some gallery or museum? But I think that's where things got started.

But when I did see it, I remembered how we used to live up there, in the back, overlooking the alley. A one-bedroom apartment. Back then it was just me and the little woman. You can't read what's on those store windows and except for the barbershop, darned if I can remember now what their business was. Doesn't make any difference. That block came down to make progress, high-rise condominiums. I doubt that there was any protest to save the old building, even with that painter Hopper becoming so famous.

So I have these three picture postcards; this one here and two others. I don't know why I keep them around. Heck, I can't even remember where or when I first got them. I should have tossed them ages ago. I guess I don't want to forget. But now I'm not so sure. Maybe Gayle was playing with me, trying to make me jealous. Get me to move out of the city; go up north to be with her sister. "Move upstate, at least until the war is over," was how she put it.

Sure, they say Hopper never touched another woman. But you can't fool me -- I know them artist types alright. Wouldn't surprise me if the only reason they ever picked up a paintbrush was for that free love stuff. That's including them women artists too.

Anyhow, I got to thinking about our first apartment up there. You can't see the doors to the second floor apartments in that painting. They were there on the side streets. Two doors and two flights of stairs running up. At the top there was a long corridor running down the middle. It was probably some fire regulation, having two doors in case of emergencies.

And you know, I bet that the Hopper guy wanted to create some kind of mystery... people trapped up there with no way to get up or down. That's why the picture seems so quiet.

I remember when you got to the top of the stairs, there was this worn carpet, bare in spots. Heck, in a couple places it was even lifted out from under the molding. A few times I came in late on Friday, from celebrating another paycheck, tripped and almost broke my neck. Too bad it was before the days when you could sue the landlord. The super told me, "That carpet was new with the building," but I don't think anyone believed him. I'm sure it was used to begin with.

Hopper 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 had a paycheck were out partying Saturday night. We're only six blocks across town from McSorley's Old Ale House.

It was probably easier for Hopper to fill the canvas with that white light anyhow instead of with people. 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 was one of them. Our apartment was on the backside of the hall in that building. It looked 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's not such a big deal.

I once bitched to the super that my rent should be less on the alley side, no view. He told me, "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.

My buddy, Charlie, lived across the hall. His apartment looked out over the street. So he went and complained to the super about the noise during the day. The wise-ass told him, "You want quiet; you should move out to the country. Go milk some cows."

Boring. I've heard lots of people say how boring that painting is. "You really lived there?" No, I've a favorite park bench up there around 80<sup>th</sup> Street off Fifth Avenue. Can't you tell? I'm a swank!"

So, take a look at that street. My memory is not that bad; I still know where I lived. Sure, that 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 lived there eight years until the war came and he painted that other morning picture.

If you're asking -- no, we didn't move in after getting married with 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 were younger chickens then. Gayle was no old hen even if we both had some New York lining around the eyes. Heck, New York life ain't easy. But we made do. Moving into that apartment was all the honeymoon we got. Heck, we both got to work just to make do. Especially back then. Jobs weren't all that easy to find at least until the war got close. I'm guessing it must have been 1934.

I could look for my old marriage license, but I know I tossed it when Gayle left. Easy to see why. You don't have to be some Freud to understand. Yeh, we had our happy times just like other people. I made sure we took the train out to the beach in Coney Island a couple of times a summer on a Sunday. I worked for the subways so I'd get some free passes. Save a nickel; save a dime. You know how that goes.

Gayle, she worked at one of those fancy hotels. Cleaning and picking up rooms for the rich. She made more in tips than salary. We didn't complain. It was steady work, which is more than most had then. She said I married her for how she squares the sheets and does the turndowns. Well, maybe she was right. But it did get me mad sometimes. I told 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. Knowing Gayle, she probably tried to straighten it up a dozen times when we were living there. She was always picking on about little things.

As for that hydrant, I can tell you I knew one person that would have loved to piss on it. If the street were deserted at 3 AM when we were coming home, I'd first make like a dog and then go around to the side street and climb those stairs in comfort. Heck, a couple of times when I knew I couldn't make it up, 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 was two down from mine facing out. I seem to remember that the windows to the left of the hydrant were 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. That was still in the '30s. Back then, Gayle was always nagging on about my pissing outside. Said I just shouldn't 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 knew that. Even I wouldn't want to be around me if I had to be dry again, not that I was back then, only "officially."

Heck, I had to listen to her going on about how dirty some of those poshes were and her boss always going on about tight corners on the beds. It didn't help I told her, "You got to work, so zip it. I ain't got it any better. You at least get to see the sun shine through the windows during the day."

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 shy socially. Me, you put a drink in my hands and I can chat up the Pope. Gayle sometimes complained 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 lived 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."

I could have popped him then and there. What did he know about Gayle and me? Nothing.

Now a dozen years later Hopper paints that Nighthawks painting with the diner. Timed it right. I was in there trying to have a quiet cup of coffee and read the paper. Sure, he asked me if it was OK. I should have said "No" -- be better for all of us. Or he should have stuck to leaving people out. It would be a happier picture if he had.

## Nighthawks (1942)\*

"Another day, another dollar," that's what they say, isn't it? I've plenty of time to think now seeing how I'm retired and all. And just as I thought, these cards are still here on the coffee table. High-priced old age homes like this, you don't see much picking up. And like a charm, the old Nighthawk picture is on top. There's me hunched over the early edition of the New York Post and my coffee.

You could guess that the lead stories were all about the war. I can't remember exactly, but there was little else. Sort of distracted me from those skirmishes Gayle and I were having then. Now it's mostly blurry; more than fifty hard years it took me to get where I can't recall what it was that we were always fighting about. Thank heaven it didn't take another fifty years here to get them to stop tucking my sheets square every time I get up to piss or go down to eat.

Yeh, it was stressful back then. It didn't help that Gayle's younger brother was out there in Pearl Harbor. She was always a little depressed -- never saw the roses, only the thorns. And then later, her brother got killed in some Pacific campaign after he had survived that sneak attack. They couldn't even find his body. That really sent her into a loop.

I guess if we had a kid, that could have helped. We tried. Then we gave up trying and then Gayle was always saying she had a headache or was too tired to.... I can tell you not having any sex made me depressed too.

I thought it was a bad idea anyhow, having kids, given our situation. I told her, you shouldn't go dropping kids if you can't afford them proper like. No, it was not all that pleasant. Anyhow, that Hopper guy caught me with my back turned in that diner. And you shouldn't be surprised by the hat and jacket. In my days we still dressed nicely to go to work. I changed in the shop. My father taught me to take pride in my appearance.

So Hopper comes back up Seventh Avenue a bunch of years after he painted that first morning picture. This time it was late at night. Like I said, 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," Charlie tells me. "There's a war going 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 end up sending me right back in a box. So then, I worked a job and a half down in the subway.

As if everyone wasn't scared we wouldn't whip that Hun. Not me, I wasn't worried. And I knew we'd also whip those Japs. We were all good and mad after Pearl Harbor. It didn't surprise me at all that we dropped those two bombs on them.

I'm not saying what we did to the Japanese-Americans out on the West Coast was right, rounding them up and putting them in prison camps. Heck, those people were just as American as you and me. No one asked me though. Besides, I had 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 a bunch of *native* Californians made big bucks with some beachfront property or some prime city real estate, telling people how they "liberated it from the Japanese." I doubt that we'll ever make full restoration [sic] or ever apologize.

Gayle was also working overtime then. She was more tired than ever. I remember she told me her sister was going to get her a job in a manufacturing plant upstate. Claimed the pay would be a lot better than what she was getting here in the city, even including her overtime. She said she was going to become a regular *Rosie the Riveter*. That's what we fought about for almost a year. I told her a woman's place is by her man. Always was and always will be.

I was griping in my coffee, as I remember it. I just didn't want to go upstairs and argue again about the same old things. I was thinking Gayle was getting tired of me and the ten years difference in our ages was showing. I was going to be 44 back then. All the stubble on my face was coming out grey. I even started to see a little shuffle in my walk. Now Gayle may have been tired, but she was still *firm and flexible* from all that house cleaning and bending over.

I used to tease her before the war about the old f & f and it wasn't *firm and flexible; I'm talking fondle and fuck!* I was younger then, more virile as they say. I think that's what she really wanted -- two f & f's every night.

Look at this picture. I saw that other couple across the counter from me when I came in. The lady looked rather upset. I know it's not nice to eavesdrop, but heck, the other fellow's problems always make yours seem easy. From what I heard them saying, I may have had it easy.

If the ten years difference in age between me and Gayle that made for our problems, let me tell you that ten thousand miles makes for even more. I heard the young lady say something about her husband fighting on some island somewhere in the Pacific 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 was easy for him to say, wasn't it? I mean, he was there sipping coffee.

It turns out that it's his own brother, which makes this young lady his sister-in-law. It got more interesting still. He started to comfort her. I couldn't help but hear. He tells her not to worry. If Rob comes back, she should get a divorce. He told her 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, he offers 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 heard 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. Maybe he was 4-F because of a bum leg. It doesn't seem as if that other leg was bum. He got his brother's wife pregnant, didn't he?

I remember opening out my paper and making 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??

So I got another cup of coffee and the *good* brother finally shuts up. I look over the top of the paper to see what's going to happen next down 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.

All this time, Hopper was standing there outside on the sidewalk with his charcoal and sketchpad, scribbling away. They go out the door and in comes Hopper. He sits down next to me and introduces himself. Like I couldn't guess he was a painter.

I was still griping in my coffee.

He asks if I could sit there a little longer. He'll buy me another cup of coffee and a slice of pie. He said he had already blocked out those other two and now wanted to spend more time getting me in good. He was using me to set the scale or something like that. So he wanted to be sure to get that right. I told him, sure, anything for art.

Thirty minutes later, he finally knocked on the window and gave me a thumbs up. The counter guy told me Hopper would pay for all of it, so I swallowed the last of the coffee and reluctantly got up. I recall that I was hoping that Gayle would be sleeping but I don't remember if that really was the case. Maybe she was pretending when I looked in. In any case, she had put my pajamas and pillow out on the couch. No note neither. I got the message. I'm no dummy.

Well, in case you didn't notice, the 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 late for Hopper to get those details in his sketches. Or maybe it's at the other end of the block.

## Morning in a City (1944)\*

OK. "It's back in the saddle again..." They showed that Gene Autry film in the hall last night. It brought back old memories, let me tell you. Made me go and dig up some of Gayle's old letters, the ones she wrote after she was safely upstate with her older sister. Boy, what a pair those two were. I don't know. It's this last picture. You see, I was convinced it was her that posed for Hopper. I told her that. It was her body and the hair color was right. I thought Hopper just changed her face a little to keep her from getting embarrassed.

I think maybe I'll shred her letters after supper. Toss these pictures too -- get rid of them once and for all. Then maybe I can go and die in peace. I'll tell you what she wrote. I just reread them so I can still remember. It sure doesn't put Hopper in a good light. But maybe Gayle was writing that all to get me mad, make sure I'd divorce her in the end. You never can tell with women.

So the first letter I get from up-state there near Schenectady is her telling me she posed nude for Hopper in that hotel across from us. Claimed that she was not my slave and was tired of me grabbing after her all the time. Well, for one thing, it wasn't all the time and for another, we were married, weren't we? Oh, she also wrote that she hoped I found the note she left on the kitchen table saying how she was going up to her sister in Schenectady and I shouldn't worry. "You knew all about it, Frank."

Well, I did find that note but it never said anything about her never coming back. I only saw her twice after that. Once when she sued for divorce and again when the divorce became final.

She wrote that her sister had called to say that the Rosie the Riveter job was still available. Her son was now in the army and that Gayle could have his room. They had years of catching up to do. Like the ten years of her being married to me. Gayle must have been pleased to peaches. She wrote that they took care of that in all of ten minutes. Can you imagine, all about me, Frank, in ten minutes!

Gayle wrote that it wasn't such a big deal standing there naked. "Hopper is really such a nice man." Like I should believe that. Well, I didn't then and I still don't believe it now. Then she says she can see our building across the street. "You know, it's changed so little since that first painting." As if she was all of a sudden such a big art critic. I wouldn't be surprised if she never heard later that the whole block was torn down.

Then she writes that the early summer breeze is so warm and comforting. Again she's an art critic, "and Edward has captured that warmth with the yellows on the curtains and the light on our building across the street."

You think she had to tell me how glad she was I worked down in the subway. Couldn't help but add that that was how she got her things out of the apartment. "Mr. Hopper was nice enough to help. We were just lucky that they had a room available here across the street." I bet!



In her next letter she tells me how when they got to the room she said, "Mr. Hopper, I would like to shower and perhaps it would be a good idea for you to go downstairs and grab a bite to eat at the diner. They really shouldn't charge you seeing how your painting has made their diner famous."

She admits that she was at first jealous that I'm in that Nighthawk picture. But then she taunts me that otherwise she never would have gotten to know Mr. Hopper. They met when we got invited to some opening of his in some gallery I can no longer remember. It was uptown, I think.

Yeh, never meeting Hopper, wouldn't that have been a shame.

Then she writes that "Mr. Hopper brought up her meals so she wouldn't have to go outside in case any of our neighbors walked by."

Later on she says, "Sorry, Frank, but after being with you 12 years, I know this is no longer working." Right. No trial separation or anything. And then in the next sentence she goes on how Mr. Hopper wanted the light just right on our building. "It was pretty close to noon, and all that bright light changed the colors. You wouldn't think it's our place."

She couldn't spare me the details, like how he started with her hair and then went on from there. She couldn't help but complain how he wasn't able to capture the sheen and bounce of her hair. Said it was her best feature. She questioned why he didn't include the picture on the wall. And by the time she wrote her letter she said the light was all different. It never was so sunny and there were grey clouds that gave her goose bumps. "I asked him to close the windows."

Really. Well it served her right.

And now she's upstate with her sister, a regular Rosie the Riveter. Tells me Mr. Hopper gave her his support. I wonder what else he gave her?

As if not having kids was all my fault and my decision. Yeh, I did say that they would have just been cannon fodder, but so what? Her sister tells her all is daisies and sunshine up there. I don't think so.

Then she goes on again about I know it's artistic to have that white window ledge lead to the white towel in front of her privates and then on to that white stripped bed. I think she must have slept on that damned picture. It seems to have got planted in her brain. I'm sure she didn't have to brag about suggesting to Hopper that he paint a red flag in front of her privates. So now she's some kind of cymbalist poet or something.

Then finally, she tells me that maybe when this war is over we should get a divorce; start down our own paths. Yeh, well, like what else is new?

Last words of her note were how she took along two of Mrs. Buck's books to read on the bus: The Good Earth and The Promise. Right! Asked me if I remembered that I bought that one for her birthday three years ago.

Something else, wouldn't you say? Me, I just think maybe getting near these artists types is a little like getting too close to the sun.

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\**Early Sunday Morning* can be viewed on the Whitney Museum web site.  
<http://whitney.org/Collection/EdwardHopper/31426>

\**Nighthawks* is in the Art Institute of Chicago.  
[http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/111628?search\\_no=1&index=0](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/111628?search_no=1&index=0)

\**Morning in a City* is in the Saatchi Gallery in London.  
[http://www.saatchigallery.com/museums/FullSizeMuseumPhotos/ac\\_id/430/image\\_id/2880/imageno/13](http://www.saatchigallery.com/museums/FullSizeMuseumPhotos/ac_id/430/image_id/2880/imageno/13)