

1,439 words

*That Apartment*

We, Alisha and I, found our dream apartment and signed the lease. A few weeks later, we were in a new neighborhood. Moving in with a partner is a new phase of life, I told everyone.

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I sat by the window, nodding off to the city breeze.

I tried to silence the alarm on my phone, but it slid off the edge. I peered down the edifice.

On the sidewalk: a beige ant. I was an upset stomach, pulsating. Consumed with concern, had I hit the person? Quickly to the elevator bank. Flying down thirty-five floors in eight seconds, I counted each nervous Mississippi. I ran outside to the exact spot where my phone connected to concrete.

The woman was still. The phone, technology shards splayed on the sidewalk.

“Is this yours?”

No words.

“You almost killed me!”

Stuttering, “Are—are you all right?” Her scowl said everything.

She massaged her palms with her thumbs. “It missed me.”

“So you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“That’s good. We’re good then.”

Going through her purse, she took out some chapstick. “You should be more careful. I would’ve sued you.” She thought for a second. “If I didn’t die, I would’ve sued you.”

“I know.”

“I would’ve ruined your life.”

“I know.”

She turned away. “Figure out your shit, man.”

“Wait!”

“What?”

“Can I do anything? I feel bad.”

“No.” She couldn’t be bothered. “Stop throwing phones off buildings.”

“Anything.”

“I was going to get some coffee.”

“I can do that. I can get you a coffee.”

She seemed hesitant then proposed a third wave shop.

Soon, we were sitting in a café drinking single-origin coffee from Burundi.

We talked. Work, friends, family. She owned a private security company. I asked her where she lived, and I couldn’t believe it. It just doesn’t compute.

“I’m on the corner of 20th and 1st,” she said.

“20th street?”

“Yeah dumbo, is there a 20th avenue?”

“I guess not.”

“Well, not in Manhattan, at least. Queens’ and Brooklyn’s got all sorts of avenues.”

“That’s where I used to live.”

“Queens?”

“No, 20th street and 1st avenue. The city. Manhattan.”

“Get out.”

“Yessir.”

“Queens and Brooklyn are still the city. What are ya doing down here?”

“I moved in with my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Yup.”

“What was your address?”

I told her, and it was just one of those things. She lived in the same place.

A corner street. The neighborhood where no one thought to rent. Close enough to everything that mattered, but far enough away to enjoy some quiet. To come home and feel relaxed, but walk five blocks to all the dives, jazz bars, and sidewalk cafés.

“This is weird,” I said.

“Well yeah, I mean this whole thing is weird.”

“No, I mean, I lived in that apartment. Your apartment.”

“Get out.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“You don’t kid about these things.”

“I am not kidding.”

We sat there at the high-ceilinged coffee shop in NoHo, taking long sips. I opened my mouth to say something, while not being sure what I was about to say. She spoke. “Let’s go then. You must want to see the place again.”

She could sense my loss.

“Lana, my name’s Lana.” She was Lana. Warm, articulate, seemingly pure of heart.

“Are you sure? I mean, I don’t want to—”

“Take the coffee to go.”

I didn't move. I wasn't sure of the proper etiquette.

"Pretty sure I could kick your ass anyway. I'm trained in three martial arts styles."

I looked down at my skinny frame, letting out a half-hearted laugh.

"I don't disagree.

"I used to 'intern' at a government agency. Catch my drift?"

I could be in and out. We didn't take the subway. We walked the twenty or so blocks north, meandering through familiar city streets. The street that split into two diagonals, lined with canopies of trees. The avenue corner that smelled of Italian baked goods. The antique shop I promised myself I'd explore. The coffee shop where I was deemed a "regular." The liquor store where Jay and G, two brothers, warmed me with gin straight before I stepped outside into the city cold.

At the long stoop of my old apartment building. Worn bricks rising up beneath a clean sky. I stood there looking up at the window I knew to be once mine and now not. At max, a memory. I stumbled on the first step.

"Don't worry. It'll be fine." She jiggled the old keys—the same bronze teeth I used to slide my thumb across. She jimmied them into the keyhole, a portal of brass, and I was in.

It was different. She had throw pillows. A distressed navy blue couch. Paintings, abstract, I think. The floors—the floors were how I remembered them. Dark parquet hardwood. A dining table born for Thanksgiving affairs. Love. There was love. A fruit bowl. I had never thought of a fruit bowl.

She ushered me in. I stood in the living room I no longer lived in. Six years in this spatial arrangement. That's an especially long time in city living.

I moved precariously. Then without asking, I walked the long hallway to my old

bedroom, the Master. It had been converted into an office. A dreadful cubicle of work.

The view. That view of the Empire State wasted on economics.

I couldn't control my ducts and wept. I felt Lana's presence between the doorjamb.

She consoled me. Maybe she knew what it felt like. "Don't worry, this is home. This is home, too." I tried to push her away. "You can visit whenever you'd like."

I pulled away from her, deciding she was villainous. Lana, who had stolen my apartment, turning my Master Bedroom into an office space.

I left the apartment. My apartment. I dashed out onto the stoop and around the corner to the shitty sushi bar I had never tried: Kano Sushi. I ordered hot sake, water for the soul. The warm elixir soothed me.

The fall sidewalks were brimming. Cosmopolitan offerings abound. Afghan kebabs, Sichuan stir-fry, Soup Dumplings, Xian style hand-stretched noodles. Tapas from the Basque Wine Bar, and so on, down the line. Anything was possible. A shoe repair store that doubled as a locksmith. The man with the driving cap who sat outside his corner bodega. I had never said one word to him.

A community in wait. I could have participated. This was a neighborhood, but it was never my neighborhood. I didn't have the awareness. An urban nomad, I worked all day, rushing to my next meeting, my next project, my next outing. On the weekends, I wanted to be anywhere but an apartment unit.

Lana found my corner seat on the intersection. She pulled out the wiry chair across from me and sat down.

I was about to say something, but she spoke first.

"Don't worry about it."

“Thanks.”

“Do you want to come back up?”

“No, that’s all right.”

“It’s really okay. You can come up.”

“It’s yours now, okay?”

“Your new place just needs to be broken in.”

Then I realized I didn’t have my phone, and that Alisha and I had made dinner plans. “I forgot. I have to go. It’s date night.” I looked at her, paralyzed, waiting for her to say something.

“Well, get up. It’s date night!”

In a string of quick motions, we said our goodbyes and thank yous. This was all a funny little story of coincidence. Like in the movies, we decided.

I hailed a taxi. Heaving the sliding door open, “Downtown, and step on it.” He accelerated straight down FDR Drive. I paid the man and hopped out of the yellow cab onto the spot on the sidewalk outside my new building. Not a shard of my phone in sight. In awe of the city’s perpetual self-maintenance, I sighed, “*New York.*”

Taking the elevators up, that apartment faded. Evanescent, but not gone. I opened the door to the new place, and, as if stepping through a portal, the haze lifted.

Everything was bright.

Alisha had ordered our favorite dishes. She laid out the spread on a red-checkered picnic blanket in the middle of our living room. It was authentically us.

The softness of creamy clove moonlight from a bouquet of fresh lilies filled the air. It was the same apartment I had left, but outlined pristine. And new, and not, it was ours.

Alisha was dressed for a Central Park stroll. Lilac forget-me-nots floated above her hemline. Coyly, “Hey you. Where’d ya go?” I stared blankly. “Never mind that. I ordered from the place downstairs. Come sit, let’s eat.”