

Introduction/Episode 1 – serial article proposal on life in New York

And so I moved to NY. How do you refuse a lease for a rent-stabilized duplex in a brownstone off Riverside Ave? You don't. And so on September 1, 1989 I entered a 13-year stretch of my life as a New Yorker. I'm pretty sure that membership to this club is irrevocable; after the 5 year mark you could end up living for another 75 years in Sub-Saharan Africa much less a different area of the U.S. and forever have that Seinfeld-ian stamp on the way you think, feel and react to just about anything.

Lou Reed made the definitive NY statement in the movie "Blue in the Face": "Yeah, I've been thinking about leaving NY...for about 25 years." That sums up the way many imported New Yorkers, myself included, feel: love and hate share a 1bdrm, 1 bath.

This is the story of my relationship with my apartment and how its' quirks colored my existence. This residential relationship, as I like to call it, stands bar none as the most critical of all relationships for a person living in the city. Why is this such a pivotal relationship? Well, as you will see, the trade off for architectural charm and living space itself can sometimes prove as challenging as living in the city itself. Especially on a 4th & 5th floor walk-up...with no laundry facilities other than the kitchen sink.

The brownstone was originally constructed in 1891 and very little other than minor cosmetic changes had been made since. By the late 1980's the area had gone from an upper middle class family-oriented neighborhood to a mix of beautiful townhouses and apartment buildings lined by sidewalks littered with crack vials. That and other lovely reminders of just how harsh a punishment the economy had meted out on the city. Thankfully the neighborhood finally turned, as most gritty ones do, and suddenly gentrification took hold in the mid-1990's. Somewhat ironically, the whole of the Upper West Side continues in the gentrification mode to this day, now making the economic existence of most of the long-time residents who had weathered the twists of neighborhood popularity rather tricky.

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At the onset of my first full summer in New York I had the quasi-genius idea to set up a kiddie pool on my roof. As the resident with sole access to the roof and chief architect of “Operation Tar Beach” (as I liked to call the black and silver covered roof), I got off to a smooth start. After inflating the plastic pool and making approximately 75 trips over the ledge and doors leading into my apartment for about a billion little pitchers of water to fill my new personal rec. center, finally my little paradise was ready.

Here was the vision: me, sitting legs out straight for optimal tanning, lounging in the pool with a cold beer in one hand and a good book in the other. Yes, mission accomplished! On a sweltering 95° day with humidity rarely seen outside southeast Asia, what could be better after work and the subterranean trip through hell on earth known as the NY Subway, than looking forward to a cool soak with a cold beverage? Realize that for me, this kiddie pool had the impact of, say, what an elaborately tiled lap pool for a person’s private use and enjoyment might have in a wealthy suburb.

Anyway, having at that point enjoyed my little oasis maybe twice, came yet another disgustingly hot day (please note previous description relating to SE Asia to really capture the atmosphere). I race home from work, tug on my bathing suit and crack open a Bud. Pulling open the iron security gate and the door behind it, I leap onto my roof and prepare to take my customized iced-tea plunge. One problem: the pool has vanished. Gone with no trace, no trail of water or torn plastic shreds to follow like bread crumbs. Nothing. Tragedy on Tar Beach.

Consider that a) the pool was filled with a good amount of water, b) there was no access to the roof by anyone other than me (one side had a wood fence separating me from my neighbors, and the other 2 sides were edges of the building), and c) there had been no hurricane-force winds likely to encourage my little pool to float on off into the sunset. An enigma wrapped in a mystery, right?

Just not the way my little post-work happy hour was supposed to end. Very très sad. Okay, maybe I'm getting a bit grandiose, but try having your personal Canyon Ranch tugged out from under your city slick and sweaty self, and see how you feel. I never did find out what happened to my little pool...apparently what I had created was a true oasis. Here one day and gone the next. And so goes the first of many head-scratching episodes of life as a rent-controlled apartment-dwelling New Yorker. An ongoing low-culture opera waiting for the fat lady in stretch pants to belt out her song...