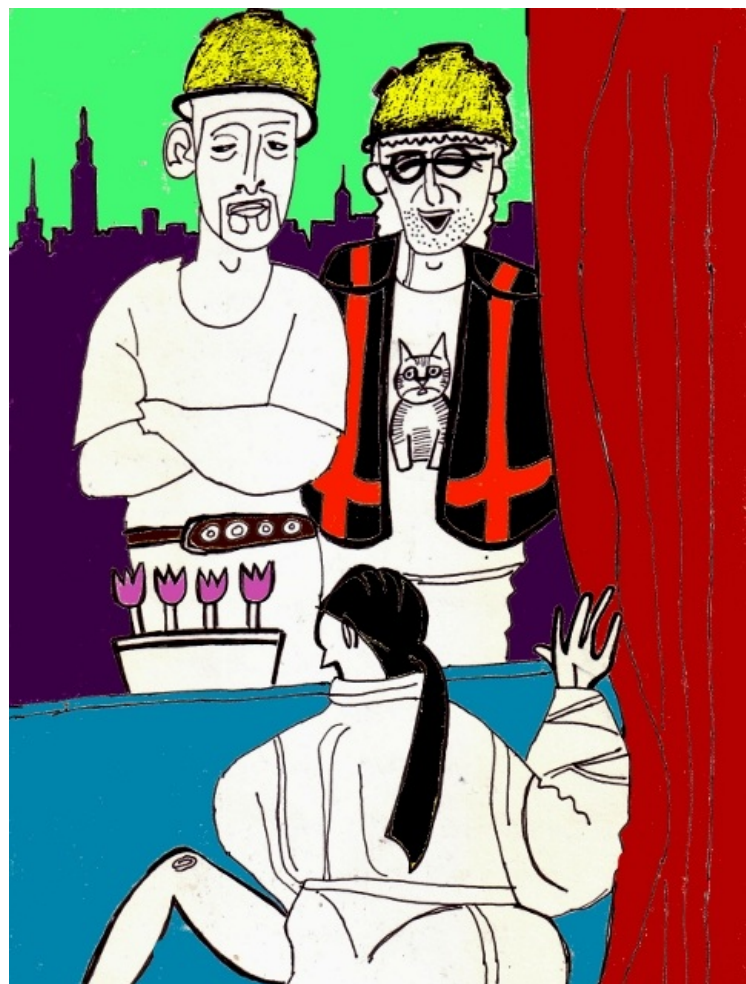


by Sara Lippmann

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READ BY SARA LIPPMANN
 ART BY PYOTR JANECEK, MADMAN
 MUSIC BY GOODMAN CARTER



She knew the listing was too good to be true: a one-bedroom apartment with eat-in kitchen and spectacular views. City and river views! In a prime Brooklyn location! Washer and dryer included! All this, it pledged, all of this for under \$300,000. This was the rare apartment of legend, such things did not fall into her lap, barren save for the streusel crumbs from her morning muffin, and yet, there it was (boom, right there!) in the ad, and there it had been on that crisp March day when she saw the place (on a whim, really, though typically she devoured the real estate section same as the obits) and after that, it was eerily smooth sailing: no snags on securing a mortgage, no clashes with the co-op board (which a-d-o-r-e-d her, her broker drawled, suggesting she run for board secretary, such was the gem of her penmanship!) Even the close was a breeze. The owner, a priest of all things, authorized it all in absentia, having moved his pulpit to the plains of Kentucky, and so open and closed, sign here and here, a Post-it for everything, checks inked and keys handed over, it was a done deal in under two months. The elusive fantasy had transformed into reality. Just like that, the apartment to-die-for was hers.

She moved in that May.

At 37, it was a plunge long overdue: Sayonara studio, hello door! It was all very grown-up. There would be no more awkward nights of entertaining the rare guest on a sagging futon, which inevitably revealed a fistful of crushed cereal whenever it was unfurled. Her apartment featured a separate kitchen complete with sun-lit breakfast nook, perfectly suited for one of those space efficient drop-leaf tables she'd coveted in the latest catalogue. Her living room showcased drapes of real Egyptian cotton, which, when drawn, offered, if you craned your neck, a stunning yet distant view of the Statue of Liberty. She stood at the window and wished she could share it. The vista alone made her eyes wet.

She loved the place. Performed the first-night ritual of lotus position and paper plates heaped high with moo shoo, rolling the word home over her tongue. It echoed in the emptiness. There was decorating to do. A wall to paint red, a wall to speckle Hollywood blue, and the rest to keep store bright white. She combed the pages of home decor magazines, researching thrifty strategies for shoe storage and vanity design. It was important to keep busy. From an office supply store she purchased a labeler and went to town. She framed swatches of flocked wallpaper, she wove tapestries from flax, she constructed coasters from book jackets (oh, the wonders of laminate!), and the result was breathtaking: crafty yet chic, a high-gloss facsimile of all the images she had hungrily, painstakingly clipped.

She splurged on a Sealy Posturpedic SuperSoft Convoluted Foam Euro Comfort Core king-sized bed.

At the housewarming party she hosted she felt like a bride in wicker as she lashed open packages: festive corning ware, Provençal platters, a pitcher shaped like Lord Chanticleer, walnut cheese boards, a beveled chip and dip bowl, a smoothie dispenser, a hand-held massager, and a tea kettle that whistled "This Little Light of Mine." She wove ribbons and bows through a paper plate and fastened it atop her curls amid growing concerns that perhaps the shower theme had gone too far. But weren't single girls the ones most in need? Granted, a few items didn't suit her (that dismal pair of urns, for example), but no matter, out spun her "thank yous" and she blew gratitude like movie star kisses, as there was nothing, she assured herself, nothing in this world that a few sunflower appliquéés and a can of paint couldn't cheer up.

Her bed took care of the rest. She munched her wheat germ and polished off crosswords. She cried through Greta Garbo films. Family photos she perused, masturbation she performed (only once and very neatly); she contemplated pet ownership and Lasik surgery, all in bed. Her answering machine filled with dial tones. She even set free the occasional booger. It was her bed. She did as she pleased.

Two months later, the notice went up in the elevator: construction on the building's northern façade was set to begin. This was Phase I. A similar notice was thrust under her door. She found the paper wedged in her welcome mat and for a moment believed it was actual mail. No big deal. Renovations should be expected in a landmark building like hers. Everything needed a periodic makeover, a touch up here and there, and the co-op board was simply taking measures to uphold appearances.

Here was the small print: her monthly maintenance would skyrocket to cover the expense. When it showed up on her bill, she sacrificed her manicures and rationalized accordingly: pre-war buildings required top-of-the line construction equipment capable of striking the delicate balance between renovation and restoration. Patina proved half the charm.

She nibbled her cuticles: happily, in compliance.

Scaffolding rose like ivy. Her air-conditioner was wrested from her bedroom window and placed on a towel in her living room. She tried turning the eyesore into a seat cushion with safety pins and chenille, but there was no hiding it. Mosquitoes rushed in through the gap and gnawed at her nightly until sheets of blue tarp were lowered from the roof to seal shut her windows. Farewell, Sweet Liberty! So long, fruit-striped sunsets over the East River! Adieu, dizzying haze of city lights! Gone was the children's laughter that tickled her senses as it wafted up from the streets, nanny-free, every Saturday afternoon. It was the first of July. 85 degrees outside, 110 degrees in.

Overnight, her apartment morphed into a moon bounce.

It was hot in bed. She kicked at the covers and sheets. It was still hot. There was no choice but to shower. She showered. Water rained upon her. Her skin puckered like turned fruit. Her hair plugged the drain. Blue wrap suffocated her windows. Claustrophobia beaded on her lip. She padded around naked and wet and alone, a seal cut from its pack.

Then they started to hammer.

The drilling -- like having her teeth filled -- was impersonal at first. It was July and it was hot and her apartment had been mummified in blue tarp. She was living in a coffin, for sure, and yet, she took solace in the fact that no one could see in or see out. Her privacy remained intact, safeguarded by walls (NB: her very own!), and the construction, at any rate, seemed remote, performed by laborers, burly and thick (how else could she picture them?) outside other residents' windows, far away, on other floors. Still she could hear them. Thwack. Bang. Drum. Mornings, she awoke to their platform rising, a seven a.m. alarm of aluminum beam and guardrail being hoisted by weatherworn cables and pulleys, transporting brick and cement and trowels and demolition machinery.

And, of course, men.

Perhaps the platform would screech to a halt for a moment outside her bedroom window each morning. Work mitts cupping tarp, hard hats pressed to pane, eyes determined to have their fill. To penetrate glass.

She tried to adapt. While the workmen did their thing outside, she, inside, did hers. Slapped wet feet on tile when she was home, which was all the time now, as her formerly itinerant freelance career had been grounded recently by an opportunity to edit oversized volumes from home, a prospect which, prior to the onslaught of construction, had seemed like a blessing (to go to work in one's bathrobe!), but was proving to be -- amid the cacophony -- a living hell. Starring her, sweat-drenched, with cookbook galley. Her only reprieve from the monotony of misplaced modifiers? The hammer.

Out came the cotton balls, ski hats, and spools of duct tape. She sharpened her pencils and she gritted her teeth. Her nails were a mess. Her glasses slid off her nose. Her ass stuck to her chair. The pounding droned on. Through the tarpaulin, the noise escalated, intensified; every so often she could catch wind of their voices mixed with laughter, like conversation at an exclusive rooftop party.

She tied up her hair and took herself to coffee shops, but the cost of lattes alone soon approximated her mortgage, and besides, it was impossible to fuss over split infinitives during the daily stroller invasion.

Not that she begrudged these women their babies.

Their full, leaky breasts.

That wasn't quite it.

The workmen were Polish. Her housekeeper was Polish, but the woman shunned the windows and began breaking more collectibles than usual. Smash went the set of urns during her routine dusting. Her housekeeper spooned honey into a beer to steady her hand. *Jedzcie, pijcie i popuszczajcie pasa*, she whispered, foam on her lip, as if, above the racket, deep in the blue cocoon, somebody, one of them, might actually hear her.

Before she could employ her housekeeper as a translator, however, another note slid beneath her door: the building, upon closer inspection, was in worse shape than first estimated. There was no place in her budget to pinch. *Do widzenia, baby*. Her housekeeper packed up her rubber gloves and left.

She waved her aromatherapy sticks but there was no stopping the flyers. They popped up in the elevator, the hallway; her mail slot. The building's entire facade was shot -- crumbling -- and was now threatening both foot traffic and infrastructure. In order to retain its landmark status, every single rotting brick in her twelve-story building would have to be removed with fastidious Polish care, and then sanded, mortared, and restored.

A project like this could take years.

She dumped ice into her tub and sat in it all day. She sat in it long after her lips went blue. The pages of her manuscript curled. Ink smeared. Sobbing. Not like anyone could hear her.

According to the board, there would be additional assessments. It was the role of the co-op secretary to deliver this news. She nixed the idea of running. While she was at it, she canceled her cable company, her Internet service, her dentist appointment, her fruit-of-the-month delivery, her book club, and her gym membership.

At 7 am, the workmen came. At 6 pm, they left. They repeated this ritual Monday through Saturday. Like postal workers, they could be depended on regardless of the weather. There was a degree of comfort to such regularity.

One day, she was sure of it, the workmen lingered during their morning ascent. She sat up in bed. Her cheeks burned. Her body was sun-starved (she feared wrinkles) and desperate for lotion. Could they see her? She reached for her sheets, wilted as week-old romaine; promptly, she kicked them away. It was too hot for modesty. If they wanted to look, let them look. Knees bent, she sat there, fingers hooked over ankles, a spray of freckles, her eyes locked with theirs like thumbs in a Chinese finger trap. In truth, there was a thick mass of blue canvas between them. But the staring match persisted in her mind, nevertheless, until she heard the sputter of crank, the churn of rigging plates, and the slow, steady creak of men recommencing their climb.

There was something to be said for the attention.

Their boots thrust against her boarded windows as they rose. For safety, but also for added insult, she figured, as these guys had to be harnessed and hooked with karabiners and thingamajiggers pretty darn good. Their soles, what she could make of them through the vinyl, resembled large paramecia. The sight filled her with disgust but mostly with fascination. She watched their footprints trespass against her view and she heard all systems grind to a halt. Plank and pulley. A radio. Now there was clamor. The workmen had parked three flights above her. It was only a matter of time.

The pounding grew louder than ever.

Without any ventilation, her apartment smelled like dead flowers, which made her sick. She was sick in the bathroom and then in her bed, sick of the imprisonment, the air stale from spent tissues, gagging, an endless jag, it was insufferable, how long had it -- had she -- she been like this. With a pair of box cutters, she slashed her waterproof tarp in two. Air muscled in; sunlight cast its spell on her parquet floors. Out the window, birds wove an afternoon dance. She threw open her casements like Juliet on her balcony, searching the horizon for her one, her only --

She'd make do with Lady Liberty.

With freedom came dust. Settling on her windowsills, sprinkling her potted plants, there were anthills of silt on the floor. At first she attended to it, sweeping and sponging, but after a while the ash turned to paste. There was so much of it. Heaps, mounds, bulldozers worth. It was crematory. With only one of her, who in the world could keep up?

The dust continued to pile.

Of course, with freedom also came more noise. In the absence of buffer, the excruciating blend of drill, crank, hammer, Polish, Earth, Wind & Fire, soon reached an impossible crescendo.

By mid-August, the workmen were directly above her. When she stuck her head out the window, she could make out their soles through the splintered boards of the platform. She could also make out thermoses, balls of aluminum foil, trash bags, a bucket, and a transistor radio. She remembered skulking beneath the Ocean City boardwalk as a child, building sand coves for jellyfish that had washed ashore. One of the workmen winked through the slats at her. She could have sworn this happened.

That night, windows flung wide, she squeezed her nipples, hard as Jujube candies. She tugged and pinched and twisted herself until she drew blood.

She woke to the thumping of feet. Sludge marks. Her windows slammed shut. They'd risen while she'd slept. For how long had they hovered, she wondered, swaying on their girder in mid-air, while she was lost to dreams? She flattened an arm across her breasts, her flesh damp as a child's palm. She knew she ought to feel violated and ashamed; instead, she lifted her hips. Her eyes sank closed as she reached for herself. Sunlight kissed her shoulders. Seagulls cawed. Funnel cake sizzled. Sand crunched in her swimsuit. Afterward, she edited a self-help book for eight hours straight.

It was the most productive she'd been all summer. To reward herself, she went down to the lobby for the newspaper. Upon her return, the elevator released a band of men, her men -- blonde, scruffy, and red in the neck -- onto the ground floor. They were talking and gesturing broadly and when they saw her they laughed, brushing past with a swift nod and the stink of kielbasa. She clutched the paper to her robe.

The crossword lost its appeal. Her chest felt tight, like the time her father pitched a softball into her belly and practically killed her. He'd only knocked the wind out of her, but still, at age nine, the impact had left her like this: a snow angel in summer, crushing buttercups, gasping for air. Back upstairs, she dove headfirst into her bed whose ridiculous size only mocked her further. How she hated them! Who were they? Where was their decency? She savored at the unbleached hairs on her arms, hating their hardhats and dimpled chins and callused thumbs and drills and scaffolding and bricks and mortar and shoes. She was just getting started. She hated and hated and hated and hated and hated and hated and then she slept.

She dreamed of smoked meats and pickled everything.

On Sunday, the silence was maddening.

Monday came, and with it, September. She woke early and planted herself in front of her window, listening for the whir of their levers. She meant business. At the first sight of their helmets, she would open her belt and flash them an eyeful, throwing them off balance, pitching them over the guardrail, their arms like windmills, tilting them toward their free-falling end. That'd be their lesson. At 7 am, however, when she still heard nothing, panic gripped her. They were never late, which could only mean something had happened. Contracts were soured or they had been maimed on the job. The whole enterprise had gone kaput. Perhaps they'd been flung back to the Eastern bloc and she was left alone once again. But as this final "what if" shook her, there they were, her reliable flock, making their earsplitting rise. Eyes shut, neck taut, terrycloth spread at full span, she unleashed her body and all its glory: colorless, childless, and shorn as an infant.

"Excuse me, we must, to close," she heard, and with that, the windows whipped shut and the men stamped their soles on her panes.

She forgave them. What else could she do? Symbiosis ensued. She kept her windows ajar (too wide would be slutty) to maintain the lines of communication. The men drilled and she listened. Sometimes she plunked herself, chin in hand, in plain view, but that added no mystery, and didn't all the glossies preach variety as the spice of life? She mixed things up, she played hide-and-seek, she stationed her hassock in hard-to-view corners, she scuttled behind her headboard, she held a mean cobra stance on the floor, she popped out from behind her armoire, sometimes even incognito (she recycled Halloween costumes): she was a farmer, a crash-test dummy, the Easter Bunny, Patty Hearst, a 1920s cigarette girl.

Oh, how they laughed. They were not like the others. She could see clearly now. These men were perfect gentlemen of the marrying kind. She'd wed the lot of them for

their citizenship. She joined in their laughter, hers shrill and almost a cackle, she who'd been wrong all along.

She flossed as if her life depended on it.

They courted her through New York's Only Classic Rock station. In one day alone, she noted this playlist:

Can't you hear me knocking?

Who can it be now?

You are always on my mind.

Angel of the morning.

More than a feeling.

American Woman.

We belong.

I want you to want me.

I want to know what love is.

Love her madly.

Love in an elevator.

Wheel in the sky.

You don't bring me flowers.

She brought them things. Cookies fresh from the tube and arranged on a plate. By quitting time, they were still gooey and raw on her sill, buried in fresh dust and pigeon poop.

She made lemonade.

"Yoo-hoo!" she called, but her voice was drowned out by their machinery. She tried again.

"Yoo-hoo!"

One of the workmen looked up from his drilling. Then another. Then a third. There were American flags stuck to their hard hats. Caulk on their pants. She struck a pose in a jade silk teddy, a gag gift from the housewarming shower she threw for herself.

"Excuse me, but we must to close."

"Be my guest," she shouted, placing her rooster pitcher on the windowsill. "I made it fresh."

"Is very dangerous."

"For you," she said, and her voice cracked.

When the rooster pitcher and its matching egg cups shattered into a million pieces, she cried, but only briefly, for she knew better than to get attached to material things.

She framed a Charles Ebbets poster.

She purchased the entire Polka-for-Dummies video series.

She studied what they ate: Fish in sour cream, breaded pork loins, potato dumplings with a dash of paprika, sauerkraut soup, beetroot soup, poppy seed cake. She tried to replicate their meals on Sundays, but boiled cabbage smelled like her grandmother's apartment, which made her sad, and she'd had it with sad, so she just ate yogurt and itched for the work-week to start.

She tweezed her eyebrows.

Their relationship bloomed.

One windy day, after the edge of their platform came careening into her window, cracking one of her casements, the workmen left the sweetest handwritten note even though they hadn't even punctured the glass. The note read: "Sorry."

In bed she smoked chewed pencils and tried out the word: "sexy."

The scaffolding moved from her bedroom to the kitchen window. She ate her muffin attentively. At the sound of their approach, she would bury her manuscript on "bichon frises" in a gesture of uncompromised loyalty and smile. The men would tip their hard hats and motion to the blueberry lodged in her teeth.

That fall it rained, and when it rained, often and all the time, in prickly gray sheets, she longed to reach out the window with paper drink umbrellas and draw them inside. She longed to make hot toddies, and she longed to remove their boots, and she longed to warm up their wet things in the dryer. The rain slapping the tarp sounded like popcorn. It wouldn't let up. In the rain, her men wore waders over their Dickies and kept working. She loosened her robe and watched them.

They mopped their brows in slow motion.

The knock came during an electrical storm. At first she didn't hear it, and then she wasn't sure what she'd heard, which was understandable given the blare, the rain,

the gusts, the crackling sky. But here was her moment. A double knock on her window, muffled by weatherproof gloves.

"Anybody home?"

They called and when she did not immediately answer they worked their fingers around her hinges and let themselves in. They were climbing gingerly over her kitchen table when she met them.

They pointed outside.

"Please if not too much trouble, is very dangerous."

"Be my guest," she said and went to strip their wet coats and shoes. They refused. She insisted. They dug their fists into pockets. She lunged once more, and they danced like wipers against a soaked windshield. The men weren't having it. She swung open her fridge and offered them its contents: baby carrots, club soda, rice pudding, a half-eaten fitness bar. She said how about a drink, you can have anything, mi casa es su casa. But they were adamant. They wanted nothing. We all want something, she said. But they said no. She said yes. They said nie, nie, and with that, they fell silent. They were slighter in build than she'd imagined, flushed from the cold, and although there was so much to ask them, where to begin, there was no need to rush, everything in due time, so she just stood there grinning and waiting and watching water drip from their helmets and plink onto her floor. Puddles formed like dog pee at their feet.

When the storm passed, the men said, "We must to go."

Then she knew. Everything she built caved in, helpless against her handling. Now, once more amid the construction: dissolution. Her moment had gone up in thumbs, all she ever wanted, ashes to ashes, a castle awash in the undertow, love, a rubble beneath her touch.

Already their backs were turned. Her casements blew open.

Her kitchen stood empty.

As if they'd never been.

There was the sputter of crank.

Platform rising.

"Wait for me," she cried, and hurled herself into their reach.

Sara Lippmann has written for magazines, taught English composition, and currently spends a lot of time scraping dried bits of Play-Doh off her floor. Her work has appeared in Slice, Raleigh Quarterly, Fourth Genre, Illness & Grace (Wising Up Press), LIT, Carve and the Beacon Street Review. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, daughter, and son.

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