

The Lady Upstairs

**Dark City Lights:
New York Stories**

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IF I'D LEARNED NOTHING ELSE in my twenty-seven years on this planet, I'd learned that when someone gives you something totally unexpected and undeserved, you don't ask questions. Just smile, say thank you, and take it quick, before they change their mind. So when the flight attendant leaned over and whispered discreetly that there was a seat for me in first class, I just smiled, said thank you, and followed her to the front of the plane.

I smiled at the old guy next to me as I sat down and told my new best friend yes, I would love a glass of champagne, thank you. Then I settled back to watch the safety demonstration. Oh yeah, the finer things. I could get used to this.

An hour or so into the flight, Old Guy Next to Me introduced himself as George Rothstein, and asked me if I was coming or going. I must have looked at him like a total moron, so he asked again, patiently, if California was home, or New York? Oh, right. I get it. I told him that I was on my way home from my cousin's kid's bar mitzvah. He was also on his way home. He had been in Los Angeles on business, real estate. He asked me what line of work I was in. I couldn't come up with a glamorous lie, so I told the truth. Social work, autism study, art therapy. The truth was, I spent most of my days trying to connect with kids who wouldn't look at me or speak to me. It was like babysitting for kids who hated me.

He seemed really interested in me, which was maybe a little creepy, but flattering. I assumed that unlike me he'd actually paid for his first-class ticket. And he was wearing a nice suit, and I was pretty sure his big gold watch was real. So I decided to go with the flow. Who knew, maybe he could be my sugar daddy.

He asked about my family, where I grew up, where I had gone to school. When he asked me where I lived, I told him about my apartment in Chelsea. It was a tiny studio, a fifth floor walk-up. The shower leaked and half of the outlets didn't work. I left out the part about the scary black stuff growing in the corner of the bathroom. I told him it was an illegal sublet and I had to be invisible, so I couldn't get anything fixed. Any day now, I was going to have to give up and find a new place.

He asked if I wouldn't be happier in a larger place with a doorman. Well yeah, sure. He explained that he owned a building on Sixty-second Street, between Madison and Park. He said he only rented to his friends, something about keeping the apartments full so he could convert the building once it became empty. Which actually didn't make any sense to me, but I figured he must know what he was doing. He asked me how much I was paying in rent and said that I could have a one-bedroom apartment in his building for what I was paying for my shithole.

Don't ask questions. Just smile, say thank you, and take it quick, before they change their mind. I said yes.

So I called the number on the business card he'd given me, and a week later I met the lady from the management company. Three weeks after that I moved in.

It was a great apartment, a grown-up apartment—a real one bedroom with a big living room, a separate dining room, and a kitchen you could cook in, if you were so inclined. And I had a real lease, with my name on it. But they also had me sign a letter that said that the landlord could relocate me to another apartment within the building at will, and could terminate the lease on ninety days' notice, „For any reason or for no reason at all.“ Sure, whatever.

I felt like I was too young and too broke to belong. It was a neighborhood for rich people. Ladies who lunched, who got their hair done and wore stockings, even on the weekend. Housekeepers in uniforms walking fussy dogs. Jamaican nannies pushing white babies in fancy strollers. Black cars with drivers idling on the street, waiting to pick up kids to take them to school in the morning. Then there was me, in jeans and a hoodie, stomping down Sixty-second Street in my Doc Martens.

And the building! It was weird enough that there was a guy opening the door for me and asking if I needed a taxi. But an elevator man? That was just ridiculous. I was used to being invisible, and here I was, all of a sudden, living my life with an audience. These guys saw me coming and going. They were going to know every time I ordered in, if I didn't leave my apartment all weekend, when I stumbled home late at night, or worse, early in the morning.

I felt self-conscious each time I went in or out. Did they wonder where I was going? Did they compare notes about me, talk among themselves? Did they notice how often I picked up a pizza on my way home, and did they know that I sometimes ate the whole thing in one night?

One thing about that building, you couldn't be anonymous. Everyone pretty much knew everyone else. There were the rent-controlled tenants, who were old and had lived there forever, and then there were the people who had moved in within the past few years and had some kind of connection to Mr. Rothstein. His banker lived next door to me, with her husband and kids. One of the guys in 3A had decorated the Rothsteins' house in Connecticut. And I heard that his grandson's math tutor lived on the sixth floor. I guess we'd all signed the secret letter, so that when the oldtimers someday moved on, we would all get kicked out and Mr. Rothstein would have his vacant building.

It was about a month after I moved in when I first noticed Margaret. It was cold out and raining. My shoes were soaked and my umbrella was dripping all over the floor as I walked through the lobby. She was sitting on a folding chair in the back, by the elevator. I thought maybe she was homeless, that the building guys were being kind, letting her stay warm and dry on a terrible night. Which was nice, but weird. Hey, who was I to judge? She smiled at me, so I smiled back.

Once I'd noticed her that first time, I saw her all the time. Not every day, but at least once or twice a week. She sometimes rode up and down in the elevator, or else she sat in that little chair in the back of the lobby, or she hung out up front by the doorman. It turned out that she lived in the building, that she was the only tenant on the top floor. She'd been living there for something like fifty years.

She was old. Seventies maybe? Eighties? She was tall and thin, stooped over and looked very frail. You could see her veins through her skin. Everything about her was gray—her skin, her eyes, her lips, her long straggly hair. It was like all of the color had been sucked out of her. She wore a shapeless faded cotton dress, or maybe it was a nightgown. From the looks of things she had nothing on underneath it. She wore a beat-up pair of bedroom slippers. She had a big, baggy sweater that she wrapped herself in when it was cold outside.

I knew that she was harmless, but something about her made me feel like I needed to keep my distance. Like if I got too close I might end up like her someday. I started taking the stairs when I went out, to avoid her in case she was in the elevator, sitting on that little bench, riding up and down. Coming down the street on my way home, I would dread that she would be in the lobby when I came in. She seemed so lonely. Just seeing her felt like a burden.

But I have to admit, I was also curious about her. I tried to guess what her story was. I imagined her in the faded and dusty penthouse apartment, where once upon a time she and her husband had thrown swanky dinner parties with butlers and a uniformed staff. Or maybe she had been the mistress of some rich and

powerful man. Was she a secret millionaire? Or was she eating ramen noodles for dinner? I figured she must have some kids and grandkids someplace, and I wondered if they ever came to visit. It seemed weird and sad that she didn't at least have some kind of nurse or aide to keep her company. I wondered if she had a cat.

For months I managed to avoid ever saying a word to her, to just give her a smile and keep moving. But eventually she wore me down. If she was in the lobby when I got home, it started to feel like she'd been waiting for me. She would comment on the weather, or ask me about my day, sometimes following me into the elevator. This was a challenge—if I didn't time it right, and finish my sentence just as we got to my floor, she would get off the elevator with me so we could finish our conversation. I would stand with her in the hallway, talking outside my door.

What was the etiquette here? Was I supposed to ask her in, offer her some leftover Chinese? See if maybe she wanted to watch Jeopardy with me? It took me a while before I figured out that I could just end the conversation when I wanted to. That I could deal with her like I dealt with my kids at work—I would just tell her, Okay, I am going to go now, and go inside while she stood there and stared at me. It felt pretty terrible, but how exactly had she become my problem? Where was everyone else? I was still new here, practically still a kid. Why did I wind up with the lady from upstairs?

One day she was in the lobby when I got home. I'd had a crappy day, and just wanted to go upstairs, change my clothes, and chill out for a little while. I was barely in the door when she handed me a letter and asked me to read it. Yeah, okay fine. It was from Rothstein Real Estate. Addressed to Ms. Margaret Sherman. So that was her name. They were offering to relocate her, at the landlord's expense, to a one-bedroom apartment on the seventh floor so they could start renovating the tenth floor. We stood in the hall outside my apartment and she told me that she didn't want to move, that she couldn't possibly move.

Seriously? I really didn't have time for this.

She was upset. She seemed frightened, desperate. So I let her come inside and I made her a cup of tea. I felt like I should offer her something to eat, but all I had was an open bag of pretzels sitting on the counter, and that just didn't feel right. Plus, if I fed her I was afraid she might never leave. I reread the letter and saw again how freaked out she was.

So I got into social worker mode. It was just an offer, I told her. You have a lease, right? They were just asking—you don't have to agree. They said that they would pay for the move—you won't have to do anything. I tried to stop myself, but I heard myself telling her I could help her find someone who could come and take the stuff she didn't need, the furniture or whatever that wouldn't fit into a smaller apartment. I don't know if she was even listening to me. She just kept saying how terrible it was, how unfair, how they were taking advantage of her. I wondered if it would help for me to call my airplane buddy, George.

I left her in my apartment and went down to the lobby. I got the doorman to give me the key, and then I went back and got her. We went upstairs together to look at the new apartment. It was fine, freshly painted, a lot like mine. She just kept shaking her head. It wasn't possible. They couldn't do this to her. They couldn't push her out of her home. It was all she had. So I asked her to show me her place.

Whoa. Let's just say, it was not what I was expecting. The tenth floor was not the penthouse. It was an SRO floor: single room occupancy. Eight tiny rooms with an old kitchen that looked like it hadn't been used in years, and a bathroom at the end of the hall. Seven of the rooms were empty, with their doors removed. She unlocked her door, two locks, and I followed her in. Her room was tidy, but absolutely crammed full of stuff. She had a twin bed, a table and a lamp, a wooden chair, and a chest of drawers. And lots and lots of boxes and shopping bags. I don't know what was in the boxes, but the shopping bags looked like they were mostly filled with other shopping bags. No pictures. No television. No books. It was no wonder she hung out in the lobby. It was the most depressing thing I had ever seen.

I had to get out of there. She had to get out of there. So first I tried tough love. This is not a good way for you to live. The other apartment is better. You'll be more comfortable there. She said I didn't understand. Well, yeah, that was certainly true. I realized that this was going to be a process, and it was going to require some patience. I told her that she didn't have to decide anything yet, that she should just think about it for a day or two. When I stood up to leave, she grabbed my hand and didn't let go. It made me wonder when was the last time she'd been touched. I took the stairs back to my apartment where I turned on the television and tried not to think about Margaret upstairs in her little room.

When I got home from work four days later, the doorman told me that Ms. Sherman had passed. That's what he said—that she'd passed. He said that when building guys realized that none of them had seen her for a few days someone went up to check on her. The door was chained on the inside, so they called the cops, who busted down the door. She was dead in her bed. The ambulance guy told him that it appeared that she had taken a bunch of Benadryl, tied a plastic bag over her head, and gone to sleep.

She fucking killed herself.

I should have been nicer to her. I should have offered to call Mr. Rothstein. I could have sat with her, talked to her. I should have let her tell me about herself. I should have given her a hug. I shouldn't have left her sitting there.

A week later the doorman said he had something for me, and handed me a shopping bag from Galeries Lafayette in Paris. He said that they'd been clearing out Margaret's room and they found it with my name on it. It was heavy. I took it upstairs and put it down on the table. I poured myself a glass of wine and looked at the bag for a long time before I opened it. I wondered when she'd been to Paris.

There was an envelope inside the bag, sitting on top of the tissue paper, with my name written on it. The note inside was on a piece of expensive-feeling stationery with her name engraved on the top. In perfect old lady penmanship it said „Thank you for being a friend.“ Jesus, Margaret, really? Now I am going to have the Golden Girls theme song stuck in my head for a week. And then I remembered that she was dead.

The tissue paper was so old, it cracked when I touched it. Wrapped inside it was an Hermes Kelly Bag. Red. Alligator or crocodile or something. It was old, and you could tell it had been used, but also that it had been cared for. It was real. It was so beautiful it glowed. And it was mine.

I looked up, toward the tenth floor or heaven. I smiled, and said thank you.

