

Chicago. Chicago. New York. New York

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For eight years in the 1990s, I lived in a high rise apartment building on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago called the New York. Perhaps the developers thought it gave the building a certain cachet to name it for a place on a map, like the Dakota in the real New York, or maybe they thought the name would give the building a dash of Manhattan mystique. Whatever the reason, it worked. Almost everyone I met in Chicago during those years had heard of the New York, had read about it, asked what it was like to live there.

The New York was one of those ostentatious high-rises built in the 1980s, a skinny building, 44 stories tall, tan and brown brick, wider in the back than the front, like the V formation of migrating geese, so that nearly all the apartments had a spectacular view of Lake Michigan. That was one of the big draws of the place; you could see the lake from almost every one of the 500 apartments. Two lighted stone porticos about 10 feet high flanked the long driveway that swept up to the two-story glass-canopied entrance. They looked like lighthouses or massive penises, take your pick.

A stream of cabs stopped at the entrance all hours of the day and night dropping off and picking up residents and guests. Inside the doorway, uniformed doormen ensconced behind a massive marble desk guarded the entrance with the zealotry of Rottweilers. They were no minimum-wage grunts dozing by a radio; the apartment manager told me that most of the doormen were off-duty police officers, and no one got into the building without their approval.

The lobby was an ode to the opulence of the Decade of Greed. It had a soaring, sky-lit ceiling and a marble floor that was notoriously slippery in the winter. Just inside the doorway, a row of stainless steel balls hung suspended from steel cables; they clicked and bobbed like metronomes in a curving cement trough through which a thin ribbon of water trickled. A polished piano gleamed in front of a huge tan and black abstract painting that covered the west wall. Mornings and evenings, Mondays through Fridays, a pale, elegant man with thinning blond hair, clad in a tuxedo, played light pleasant music to soothe the residents as they trudged back

through the lobby in the evenings with exhausted eyes and heavy briefcases. The pianist seemed wistful as he played; I wondered if he felt sad that his years of training had culminated in being a human Muzak machine to the yuppies who passed him each evening without a glance.

Often people I met at cocktail parties or volleyball asked me where I lived. "Oh, Lake Shore and Waveland," I'd say.

"The New York?" the acquaintance would ask, eyebrows raised, "What's it like inside? Is it really nice? Wow, it must be cool to live there."

"Yes," I'd nod, feeling like a fraud, because of the implication that you had to have money to live there when, in fact, the rents for studios and one-bedroom apartments were surprisingly affordable, at least for the small units without balconies on the lower floors, like mine. It was 1992 and vacant units in upscale apartment buildings glutted the market, so I got a good deal on the rent.

My apartment, number 704, was a trim 600 square feet, long and narrow like a boxcar with a postage stamp-sized kitchen, but it had huge closets and a fantastic view. It faced north and east, and when I stood at the bay window in the living room in the morning, coffee mug in hand, I could see the cars zipping by on Lake Shore Drive, the softball diamonds in Waveland Park, and the old brick clubhouse with the clock tower near the first hole of Waveland Golf Course. Beyond it, Lake Michigan unfurled in shimmering waves of blue or green or gray, depending on the season and time of day. The lake was always beautiful, summer or winter, cloudy or sunny. I never tired of looking at it.

From the other window, the narrow one facing west, I could see the house, apartments, and churches stretching west on Waveland Avenue and watch the splashes of red and orange light spill across the rooftops at sunset. Wrigley Field was three blocks west of the New York; I couldn't see it from my floor, but at night, with my windows open, I could hear the crowd cheer. The sound lulled me to sleep many nights, like waves or crickets chirping.

My apartment never felt like home. It was too small and too neutral to ever feel like anything other than a glorified hotel room. No matter how many pictures I hung on the wall and how artfully I arranged my furniture, I couldn't disguise the industrial gray carpeting and stark white walls. Outside my door, the hallways reminded me of a hotel, too: freshly vacuumed, tastefully decorated in shades of deep blue and cream and utterly anonymous. In the eight years that I lived there, I rarely saw another person in the hallway. When my friend Katie visited from Wisconsin, she insisted that she didn't believe anyone else really lived on my floor because she never saw or heard anyone else. I eventually met two people on my floor—a woman who lived next door for a few years and an older woman who lived at the end of the hall and gave voice lessons for a living.

Those two, along with an elderly man whom I'd see on the elevator with his overweight bulldog, were the only ones who ever smiled or said hello to me. Everyone else I knew only as a muffled door shutting far down the hallway, the back of a trench coat disappearing into a doorway, or an expressionless person in the elevator.

I didn't really mind the lack of conviviality inside, at least not at first, at least not at that time of my life, because the New York was not a place where you lived if you wanted to stay inside. It was a place you lived to experience life outside its doors. The New York was marketed as a place for active urban professionals. The newspaper ads showed pictures of handsome, youthful people playing tennis, jogging, or sipping coffee at an outdoor cafe.

I must have fit the targeted demographic, because what I remember most vividly about my life at the New York is constantly moving, coming and going, on my way to this or that. I would hurry through the lobby in the evening, shoe heels clicking on the marble floor, and say to Duke, the burly ex-cop and doorman, "Hi, Duke, could you please turn on the cab light? Thank you." I would stand outside the lobby in the dry, cold air of a winter's night, in jeans and a turtleneck sweater, hands pressed in the pockets of my leather jacket, stamping my boots on the cement, waiting for the cab to pull in the driveway. I'd get in and say, "The corner of Clark and Diversey, please" if I was going to dinner with my crowd of friends at the Italian restaurant we liked, or "Seminary and Wrightwood" if I was visiting my friends Allen and Billy, or "Southport and Greenleaf" if I was headed to my writing workshop.

Sometimes I had to give directions to the cabdriver on the way to someplace, but I never, ever had to give directions on the way home. "Thirty-six sixty North Lake Shore Drive" was all I had to say and the cab driver immediately knew where to go.

"The New York, right?" the cab driver would ask.

"Yes, the New York."

"Nice building," the driver would say as he sped north on Lake Shore Drive. The cab drivers always drove me north to my apartment, never south, because due to my Lakeview neighborhood snobbishness, the city north of Irving Park Road simply did not exist for me. Irving Park was the dividing line where the civilized streets of Lakeview ended and the wilderness of Uptown began. No one I knew who lived in Lakeview or Lincoln Park ever ventured further north than Irving Park Road at that time. Uptown and Edgewater was where you lived if you couldn't afford to live in Lakeview, or if you were an adventurous urban pioneer leading the wave of gentrification.

On sticky summer evenings I loped through the lobby wearing sweat shorts and a faded t-shirt from my coed volleyball league, headed out for a bike ride or walk along the lake.

On gray January afternoons I brushed the snow off my coat before entering the lobby, back from seeing a movie at Landmark Century Cinema—usually something artsy or foreign—with a friend or playing a game of volleyball at the Lincoln Park High School gym.

After awkward dates, I would bolt out on my date's car and dash into the lobby, pausing only to say a quick hello to Duke. Other nights, heart pounding with excitement, I would wait impatiently for a cab in the lobby to take me to a date with a man I really liked.

Sometimes my friends and I would go to the black-tie fundraisers sponsored by Lincoln Park Young Professionals or one of the other groups popular with young Chicagoans. Afterwards, I would walk through the lobby at 2 a.m., silent and empty except for the whir of the floor polishing machine operated by the impassive-faced night janitor. My feet would ache, my panty hose would be snagged, and I'd smell of smoke. Sometimes I'd be smiling, after a night that was fun, feeling lucky to be part of this pulsing, interesting urban life. Other times I'd be frowning, trying to convince myself that the \$125 ticket had been worth it for two glasses of wine and two hours of trying to make conversation with strangers.

I hurried through that lobby every day: to work, volleyball games, exercise classes, writing workshops, movies, plays, happy hours, parties, dinners, and dates. Sometimes, looking back now, I am not sure now what I was trying to accomplish. Perhaps I was trying to make up for the fun times I'd missed in my twenties, when I had been broke and slogging my way through graduate school. I thought it was pointless to live in a big city if you weren't going to take advantage of all that it offered.

I lived in that apartment for eight years. I never thought I would stay so long in a building that felt like a hotel, but it was so easy, so convenient, to live there. The Number 146 express bus to downtown stopped in front of the building. The grocery store was around the corner. The lakefront bike path was across the street. And so I stayed and stayed, and my life moved on through most of my thirties in a whirl of the activities enjoyed by single people in Chicago with a little money in their pockets, and my apartment served as my base to sleep and eat. Every September I'd find my lease renewal notice under my door, every year I took a desultory glance at condos for sale, and every year I re-signed my lease.

Then one year I found a notice under my door stating that the New York was converting to a condominium. The price for my bland box was \$169,000, as is. It wasn't worth the price.

It was time to say good-bye to my life in the New York.

My cheerful realtor began showing me one condo after another which I rejected one by one. Too dark, no view, ugly bathroom, tiny,

lacked security, terrible location. I marvel at my realtor's patience at my pickiness.

When I had given up ever finding a place that I would really like and was resigned to renting someplace else, I found my home. I walked into a one-bedroom condo in an art deco building on Marine Drive, three miles north of the New York, smack in the middle of Uptown, and fell in love. The condo could not have been more different than the New York. The plumbing was old, the closets were small, and the elevator was slow. The neighborhood was miles away from the bustle of Lakeview, but the building had a charming, flower-filled courtyard with a glass brick art deco fountain and frosted glass art deco sconces and tiled mosaic walls in the lobby. My unit had just been rehabbed top to bottom, and my new home was light and airy with gleaming oak parquet floors, 10-foot ceilings, fresh ivory paint, track lights, granite windowsills and birch cabinets. It was as sweet and inviting as a dollhouse. It was across the street from the park and bike path, and I could even see a sliver of the lake from the bedroom window. Most of all, it was all mine.

So in December 2000, I stood one last time in my apartment, now stripped down to its white walls and gray carpeting, and stood at the bay window and gazed one last time at that beautiful view of Lake Michigan. Then I walked out and began my life in my new home.

My life changed after I moved to Marine Drive. I quickly got to know my neighbors. Unlike the New York, this building was filled with a delightful potpourri of residents: an architect and his wife, a flautist, who lived with their baby daughter on the floor above me, an elderly African-American woman with a merry shih tzu, a Hispanic gay man on the first floor who listened to pulsating Latin techno-pop music, a pet photographer with a sweet little pug named Pig; an interracial lesbian couple, an Hawaiian woman who made quilts, and a family from Thailand. People smiled. They said hello and chatted. I had moved from an anonymous, homogenous hotel to an eclectic, quirky village, and I loved it.

I still met my friends for dinner and movies and drinks, I still stood in the lobby waiting for a cab. I still rode my bike along the lake and took long walks by the beach. But I no longer felt that desire to be out and about, doing and moving, all the time. I was content to spend an afternoon at home, painting the walls or hanging pictures or learning to cook. My life felt less exciting, but more solid.

Two framed pictures of the view of Waveland Park and Lake Michigan, as seen from the bay window in my apartment at the New York—one taken in the winter, the other in the summer—now sit on a shelf in my condo. I have them to remind me, not only of the view, but of that place where I lived for eight years, when I was young and new to the city and all the promise and excitement of Chicago lay outside my door.