

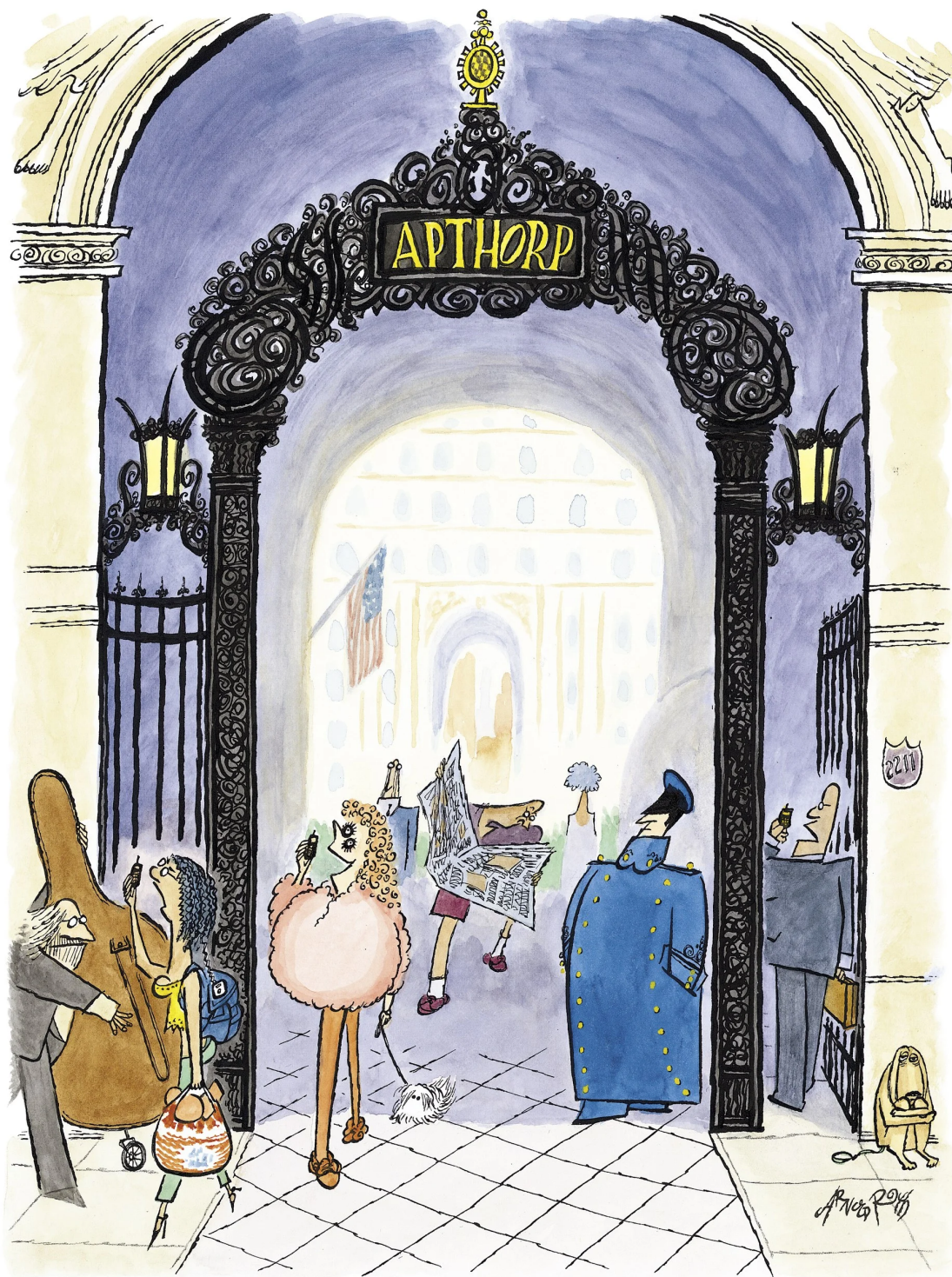
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# NORA EPHRON'S APARTMENT: A LOVE STORY

*To move into the Apthorp was to enter a state of giddy, rent-stabilized delirium.*

**By Nora Ephron**

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*To move into the Apthorp was to enter a state of giddy, rent-stabilized delirium.* Illustration by Arnold Roth

**I**n February, 1980, two months after the birth of my second child and the simultaneous end of my marriage, I fell madly in love. I was looking for a place to live, and one afternoon I walked just ten steps into an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and my heart stood still. This was it. At first sight. Eureka. Ten steps in and I said, “I’ll take it.”

The apartment was huge. It was on the fifth floor of the Apthorp, a famous stone pile at the corner of Broadway and Seventy-ninth Street. The rent was fifteen hundred dollars a month, which, by Manhattan standards, was practically a bargain. Trust me, it was. In addition, I had to pay the previous tenant twenty-four thousand dollars in key money (as it's known in New York City) for the right to move in. I didn't have twenty-four thousand dollars. I went to a bank and borrowed the money. No one in the building could believe that I would pay so much in key money for a rental apartment; it was an astronomical amount. But the apartment had beautiful rooms (most of them painted taxicab yellow, but that could easily be fixed); high ceilings; lots of light; two gorgeous (although nonworking) fireplaces; and five, count them, five bedrooms. It seemed to me that if I lived in the building for twenty-four years the fee would amortize out to only a thousand dollars a year, a very small surcharge. I mean, we're talking about only \$2.74 a day, which is less than a cappuccino at Starbucks. Not that there was a Starbucks then. And not that I was planning to live in the Apthorp for twenty-four years. I was planning to live there forever. Till death did us part. So it would probably amortize out to even less. That's how I figured it. (I should point out that I don't normally use the word "amortize" unless I'm trying to prove that something I can't really afford is not just a bargain but practically free. This usually involves dividing the cost of the item I can't afford by the number of years I'm planning to use it, or, if that doesn't work, by the number of days or hours or minutes, until I get to a number that is less than the cost of a cappuccino.)

But forget the money. This, after all, is not a story about money. It's a story about love. And all stories about love begin with a certain amount of rationalization.

I had never planned to live on the Upper West Side, but after a few weeks I couldn't imagine living anywhere else, and I began, in my manner, to make a religion out of my neighborhood. This was probably a consequence of my not having any other religion in my life, but never mind. I was a block from H & H Bagels and Zabar's. I was half a block from a subway station. There was an all-night newsstand across the street. On the corner was La Caridad, the greatest Cuban-Chinese restaurant in the world, or so I told my friends, and I made a religion of it, too.

But my true religious zeal focussed on the Apthorp itself. I honestly believed that at the lowest moment in my adult life I'd been rescued by a building. All right, I'm being melodramatic, but that's what I believed. I'd left New York City a year earlier to move to Washington, D.C., for what I sincerely thought would be the rest of my life. I'd tried to be cheerful about it. But the horrible reality kept crashing in on me. I would stare out the window of my Washington apartment, which had a commanding view of the lions at the National Zoo. The lions at the National Zoo! Oh, the metaphors of captivity that leaped to mind! The lions lived in a large, comfortable space, like me, and had plenty of food, like me. But were they happy? Et cetera. At other times, the old Clairol ad—"If I've only one life to live, let me live it as a blonde"—reverberated through my brain, although my version of it had nothing to do with hair color. If I have only one life to live, I thought, self-pityingly, why am I living it here? But then, of course, I would remember why: I was married, and my husband lived in Washington, and I was in love with him, and we had one baby and another on the way.

When my marriage came to an end, I realized that I would no longer have to worry about whether the marginal neighborhood where we lived was ever going to have a cheese store. I would be free to move back to New York City—which was not just the Big Apple but Cheese Central. But I had no hope that I'd find a place to rent that I could afford that had room enough for us all.

**W**hen you give up your apartment in New York and move to another city, New York becomes the worst version of itself. Someone I know once wisely said that the expression "It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there" is

completely wrong where New York is concerned; the opposite is true. New York is a very livable city. But when you move away and become a visitor the city seems to turn against you. It's much more expensive (because you have to eat all your meals out and pay for a place to sleep) and much more unfriendly. Things change in New York; things change all the time. You don't mind this when you live here; it's part of the caffeinated romance of the city that never sleeps. But when you leave you experience change as a betrayal. You walk up Third Avenue planning to buy a brownie at a bakery you've always been loyal to, and the bakery's gone. Your dry cleaner moves to Florida; your dentist retires; the lady who made the pies on West Fourth Street vanishes; the *maitre d'* at P. J. Clarke's quits, and you realize you're going to have to start from scratch tipping your way into the heart of the cold, chic young woman now at the door. You've turned your back for only a moment, and suddenly everything's different. You were an insider, a native, a subway traveller, a purveyor of tips into the good stuff, and now you're just another frequent flyer, stuck in a taxi on the Grand Central Parkway as you wing in and out of LaGuardia. Meanwhile, you read that Manhattan rents are going up, they're climbing higher, they've reached the stratosphere. It seems that the moment you left town they put up a wall around the place, and you will never manage to vault over it and get back into the city again. The apartment in the Apthorp seemed like an urban miracle. I'd found a haven. And the architecture of the building added to the illusion.

The Apthorp, which was built in 1908 by the Astor family, is twelve stories high and the size of a full city block. From the street, it's lumpen, Middle European, and solid as a tank, but its core is a large courtyard with two marble fountains and a lovely garden. Enter the courtyard, and the city falls away; you find yourself in the embrace of a beautiful sheltered park. There are stone benches where you can sit in the afternoon as your children run merrily around, ride their bicycles, fight with one another, and threaten to fall into the fountain and drown. In the spring, there are tulips and azaleas, in summer pale-blue hostas and hydrangeas.

Most people who don't live in New York have no idea that New Yorkers have exactly the same sense of neighborhood that supposedly exists in small-town America; in the Apthorp, this sense is magnified, because the courtyard provides countless opportunities for residents to bump into one another and eventually learn one another's names. At Halloween, those of us with small children turned the courtyard street lamps into a fantasy of pumpkin-headed ghosts; in December the landlords erected an electric menorah, which coexisted with a Christmas tree covered with twinkle lights.

As it happened, I had several acquaintances who lived in the building, and a few of them became close friends—at least in part because we were neighbors. The man I was seeing, whom I eventually married, managed to tip his way to a lease on a top-floor apartment. My sister Delia and her husband moved into the building; she, too, planned to live there until the day she died. When Delia and I worked together writing movies, it was a simple matter of her coming down from her apartment, crossing the courtyard, and coming up to mine; on rainy days, she could even take an underground route. My friend Rosie O'Donnell took an apartment on the top floor and became so captivated by a doorman named George, who had a big personality, that she booked him onto her talk show. Like most Apthorp doormen, George did not actually open the door—which was, incidentally, a huge, heavy iron gate that you often desperately needed help with—but he did provide a running commentary on everyone who lived in the building, and whenever I came home he filled me in on the whereabouts of my husband, my boys, my babysitter, my sister, my brother-in-law, and even Rosie, who painted her apartment orange, installed walls of shelves for her extensive collection of Happy Meal toys, feuded with her neighbors about her dogs, and fought with the landlords about the fact that her washing machine was somehow irrevocably hooked up to the bathtub drain. Then she moved out. I was stunned. I couldn't believe that anyone would leave the Apthorp voluntarily. I was never going to leave. They will take me out feet first, I said.

Every so often, an ambulance pulled into the courtyard and did take a tenant out feet first, and within minutes the landlords would be deluged with inquiries about a possible vacancy, most of them from tenants who had seen the ambulance come in or out (or had heard about it from George) and wanted to upgrade to a larger space.

At the time I moved in, the Apthorp was owned by a consortium of elderly persons—although, come to think of it, they were not much older than I am now. One of them was a charming, courtly gentleman, active in all sorts of charities involving Holocaust survivors. He lived long enough to be taken to court for a number of things, none of them the crime that I happen to believe he was guilty of, which was lining his pockets with cash payoffs made by people who were either moving in or moving out of the building. I was very fond of him and his sporty red Porsche, which he drove right up to the day he was taken to the hospital. There he took his last kickback, from neighbors of mine, and died. The kickback was part of the two hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars in key money my neighbors had charged a new tenant for the right to take over their lease. That's right. Someone paid two hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars in key money to move into the Apthorp. How was this possible? What was the thinking? Actually, I could guess: the thinking was that over fifty-six years the two hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars would amortize out to four cappuccinos a day. Grande cappuccinos. Mucho grande cappuccinos.

I lived in the Apthorp in a state of giddy delirium for about ten years. The water in the bathtub often ran brown, there was probably asbestos in the radiators, and the exterior of the building was encrusted with soot. Also, there were mice. Who cared? My rent slowly inched up—the Rent Guidelines Board allowed increases of around eight per cent every two years—but the apartment was still a bargain. By this time, the real-estate boom had begun in New York, and the newspapers were full of shocking articles about escalating rents; there were one-room apartments in Manhattan renting for two thousand dollars a month. I was paying the same amount for eight rooms. I felt like a genius.

Meanwhile, there were unhappy tenants in the building, suing the landlords over various grievances; I couldn't imagine why. What did they want? Service? A paint job every so often? The willing replacement of a broken appliance? There were even residents who complained about the fact that the building didn't allow your Chinese food to be brought up to your apartment. So what? Every time I walked into the courtyard at the end of the day, I fell in love all over again.

My feelings were summed up perfectly by a policeman who turned up one night to handle an altercation on my floor. My next-door neighbor was a kind and pleasant professor, the sort of man who would not hurt a flea; his son often left his bicycle in the vestibule outside our apartment. A neighbor down the hall, an accountant, became angry about the professor's son's bicycle, which he apparently thought was an eyesore, and it probably was. One afternoon, he decided to put it directly in front of the professor's door, blocking it. The professor found the bike there and returned it to its spot in the hallway. The accountant put it back in front of the door, once again blocking it. There was quite a lot of noisy crashing about while all this was going on, and it got my attention; as a result, I was lurking at my front door, peeking out into the vestibule, when the final chapter of the drama occurred.

The professor had just put the bicycle back out in the hall, and he, too, was waiting inside his front door hoping to catch the accountant in the act of once again moving it. Both of us stood there idiotically looking through the sheer curtains on our glass-panelled front doors. Sure enough, the accountant came down the hall and moved the bicycle so that it blocked the professor's door. At that moment, the professor flung his door open and began shouting at the accountant, whom, incidentally, he towered over. Within seconds, he lost it completely and slugged the accountant. It was incredibly exciting. The accountant called the police. The police arrived in short order. Since I, owing to my nosiness, had been a witness to the incident, I invited myself to the meeting

with the police and my neighbors. The meeting took place in the professor's rent-stabilized apartment, which had even more bedrooms than mine. Each man told his version of events, and then I told mine. I have to say that mine was the best version, since it included a short, extremely insightful, and probably completely irrelevant digression about the impatience that childless people have for people with children (and bicycles). You had to be there. Anyway, when we were all finished one of the policemen shook his head and stood up. "Why can't you people get along?" he said as he headed for the door. "I would kill to live in this building."

**E**ventually, I began to have a recurring dream about the Apthorp—or, to be accurate, a recurring nightmare. I dreamed I had accidentally moved out of the building, realized it was the worst mistake of my life, and couldn't get my lease back. I have had enough psychoanalysis to know not to take such dreams literally, but it's nonetheless amazing to me that, when my unconscious mind searched for a symbol of what I would most hate to lose, it came up with my apartment.

Around 1990, rumors began to spread that there was about to be a change in the rent laws: under certain circumstances, rent stabilization could be abolished, and landlords would be able to raise rents to something known as fair-market value. I refused to pay any attention. My neighbors were obsessed with what might happen; they suggested that our rents might be raised to eight or ten thousand dollars a month. I thought that they were being unbelievably neurotic. Rent stabilization was an indelible part of New York life, like Gray's Papaya. It would never be tampered with. I was willing to concede (well, not too willing) that under certain circumstances there might be some justice in the new law; I could understand that you could make a case (a weak case) that people like me had been getting away with a form of subsidized housing for years; I could see (dimly) that the landlords were entitled to something. But I was sure that if our rents were raised the hike would be a reasonable one. After all, the tenants in the building were a family. The landlords understood that. They would never do anything so unreasonable as to double or triple our rents. This moment of innocence on my part was comparable to the moment—early in all love stories that end badly—when a wife discovers the faintest whiff of another woman's perfume on her husband's shirt, decides it's nothing, and goes blithely about her business. I went blithely about my business. And then the building hired a manager named Barbara Ross.

Miss Ross was a small, frightening woman with pale-white skin, bright-red lips, and a huge, jet-black beehive of hair on top of her head. The beehive was so outsized and bizarre that it reminded me of the nineteen-fifties urban legend about the woman who teased her hair so much that cockroaches moved in. Her voice dripped honey, which made her even more terrifying. She was either forty years old or seventy, no one knew. She wore pink silk shantung suits with gigantic shoulder pads. She lurked everywhere. She lived in New Jersey, but she spent Thursday nights in the building office, and rumor had it that she sneaked around in her bare feet, trying to catch the elevator operators napping. She issued memos discouraging children from playing ball in the courtyard. She repaved the courtyard and covered the cobblestones with tar. She had a way of coming upon you in the hallway and making you feel guilty even if you were entirely innocent. She was, in short, a character from a nightmare, so much so that she instantly became a running character in mine: I began to dream that I had accidentally moved out of the Apthorp, realized it was the worst mistake of my life, and couldn't get my lease back because of Miss Ross.

Meanwhile, the unthinkable happened. The state legislature passed a luxury-decontrol law stating that any tenant whose rent was more than two thousand dollars a month and who earned more than two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year would automatically be removed from rent stabilization. I was stunned. I could understand the new law applying to new tenants, but how on earth could it apply to those of us who had lived in the building for years under the implicit bargain involved in rent stabilization? I had never gotten a paint job from the building, I'd never even asked for one, and now the landlords were about to treat me as if I were living in a luxury apartment. It was totally unfair! It was completely unjust! It was wrong! It was practically

unconstitutional! It was also, of course, not remotely compelling to anyone in the outside world. I made a very decent living. I was going to have my rent raised. What's more, as far as I knew, I was going to be the first person in the building to undergo the experience. And no one cared. Even I wouldn't have cared if I hadn't been me. On the other hand, I wasn't exactly me. I was in love. I was a true believer, just like one of those French villagers in the Middle Ages who come to believe they've seen the tears of St. Cecilia on a scrap of oilcloth; I was a character in a story about mass delusion and the madness of crowds. I was, in short, completely nuts.

And so I went to see Miss Ross. As I recall, I gave a tender speech about my love for the building. It was fantastically moving, if not to her. She informed me that my rent was going to be tripled. We negotiated. She dropped the price. She dropped it just enough for me to believe that I had managed a small victory. How much did she drop it to? I can't possibly tell you. I'm too embarrassed to type the number. Even if I assured you that in the context of New York rents it wasn't that outrageous, you'd never believe me. The point is, I agreed to pay it. I signed a new lease.

I signed because I had enough money to pay the rent but not nearly enough to buy an apartment nearly as nice anywhere in the city.

I signed because my accountant was able, in that way accountants have, to persuade me that the money I would pay in rent was less than I would pay in monthly maintenance plus mortgage interest on a co-op apartment.

I signed because I was, as you already know, an expert in rationalization, and I convinced myself that there were huge savings involved in my staying in the building. The cost of moving, for instance. The cost of new telephone service. The cost of the postage required to notify my friends that I would be living at a new address. The cost of furniture, in case I needed new furniture for the apartment I hadn't found and wasn't moving into. The hours and days and possibly even weeks of my time that would be wasted trying to reach the cable company—during which time I might instead write a great novel and earn a small fortune that would more than pay for the rent increase.

But, as I said, this isn't a story about money. This is a story about love. I signed the lease because I wasn't ready to get a divorce from my building.

**M**any years ago, when I was in analysis, my therapist used to say, "Love is homesickness." What she meant was that you tend to fall in love with someone who reminds you of one of your parents. This, of course, is one of those things that analysts always say, even though it isn't really true. Just about anyone on the planet is capable of reminding you of something about one of your parents, even if it's only a dimple. But I don't mean to digress. The point I want to make is that love may or may not be homesickness, but homesickness is definitely love.

My apartment in the Apthorp was really the only space that my children and I had ever lived in together. Since the day we moved in, we had never locked the door. It was the place where Max got his head stuck in a cake pan and Jacob learned to tie his shoelaces. My husband, Nick, and I were married there, in front of the nonworking living-room fireplace. It was a symbol of family. It was an emblem of the moment in my life when my luck changed. It was part of my identity—or, at least, part of my wishful thinking about my identity. Because it was on the unfashionable West Side, just living there made me feel virtuous and brainy. Because it was a rental, it made me feel unpretentious. Because it was shabby, it made me feel chic. In short, it was home in

a profound, probably narcissistic, and, I suspect, all too typical way, and it seemed to me that no place on earth would ever feel the same.

The whammies began to mount up. A mysterious dead body was found on the roof of the building. One of the apartments caught fire. An apartment on the eleventh floor was robbed, and the housekeeper was assaulted.

And then truly shocking things began to happen. The landlords cleaned the building! The landlords, who had basically done nothing to the building since we moved in, sandblasted the soot from the exterior, replaced pipes, redid the elevators, and painted the elevator and lobby ceilings gold. They dressed the building employees in braid-trimmed uniforms with epaulets; the staff began to look like a Hispanic version of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. The senior landlord, a man named Nason Gordon, removed the mailbox from the building entrance and replaced it with a large marble statue of a naked woman, which the tenants instantly christened Our Lady of the Apthorp. He planted horrible white stucco urns outside the entrance, and dotted the courtyard with ludicrous statues of lions. The tenants experienced all these changes—every last one—as acts of hostility. Clearly, the improvements were being made for one reason and one reason alone—to raise our rents. Which was true; every time the landlords spent money on the building, they trotted off to the Rent Guidelines Board and asked for rent increases based on their expenditures. As a result, more and more tenants lurched toward luxury decontrol and a state of absolute panic. The fear was exacerbated by the fact that the new law made it possible for landlords to be utterly capricious about the increases. After all, what was fair-market value for an eight-room apartment in a city where there were almost no eight-room apartments for rent?

The nineteen-nineties were cresting, and there was a huge amount of money out there in the streets of New York. Empty apartments in the Apthorp were renovated, Miss Ross picked out garish chandeliers for them, and rich tenants moved in. One of the new tenants was actually paying twenty-four thousand dollars a month in rent. Twenty-four thousand dollars a month—and you still couldn't get the doorman to open the gate or have the Chinese food delivered to you. Rich men getting divorces moved in. Movie stars came and went.

The courtyard, once an idyllic spot full of happy, laughing children, was suddenly crowded with idling limousines waiting for the new tenants to be spirited away to their fabulous midtown careers. Angry tenants waved petitions and legal papers and spread rumors of further impending rent rises.

My lease expired again, and Miss Ross called to tell me that my rent was being raised. The landlords were willing to give me a three-year lease—ten thousand dollars a month the first year, eleven thousand the second, twelve thousand the third. My rent had effectively been raised four hundred per cent in three years.

And, just like that, I fell out of love. Twelve thousand dollars a month is a lot of cappuccino. And guess what? I don't drink cappuccino. I never have. I called a real-estate broker and began to look at apartments. Unrequited love's a bore, as Lorenz Hart once wrote. It had taken me significantly longer to come to that realization in the area of real estate than it ever had in the area of marriage, but I was finally, irrevocably there. Since my love affair with the building was one-sided, falling out of love was fairly uncomplicated. My children were grown and unable to voice the sorts of objections they had put forth during early exploratory conversations on the topic of moving, when they implored me not to leave the only home they'd ever known. My husband was up for anything. My sister was already on the street, looking for a new place, my sister—who had been quoted in the *Times* talking about the "heart and soul" of the Apthorp—was out there, cold-eyed, unsentimental, and threatening to move downtown. I called



my accountant, who explained to me (as carefully as he had explained to me only a few years earlier that it made more sense to rent than to buy) that it made more sense to buy than to rent.

So we prepared to move. We threw away whole pieces of our lives: the Care Bears, the wire shelving in the basement storage room, the boxes of bank statements, the posters we hung on the walls when we were young, the stereo speakers that no longer worked, the first computer we ever bought, the snowboard, the surfboard, the drum kit, the Portafiles full of documents relating to movies never made. Boxes of clothing went to charity. Boxes of books went to libraries in homeless shelters. We felt cleansed. We'd got back to basics. We'd been forced to confront what we had outgrown, what we would no longer need, who we were. We had taken stock. It was as if we had died but got to sort through our things; it was as if we'd been reborn and were now able to start accumulating things all over again.

The new place was considerably smaller than the apartment in the Apthorp. It was on the Upper East Side, a neighborhood that on some level I had spent more than twenty years thinking of as the enemy of everything I held dear. It was nowhere near a Cuban-Chinese restaurant. But the fireplace worked, the doorman opened the door, and the Chinese food was delivered to your apartment. Within hours of moving in, I was at home. I was astonished. I was amazed. Most of all, I was mortified. I hadn't been so mortified since the end of my marriage, and a great many of the things that went through my head apropos of that marriage went through my head now: Why hadn't I left at the first whiff of the other woman's perfume? Why hadn't I realized how much of what I thought of as love was simply my own highly developed gift for making lemonade? What failure of imagination had caused me to forget that life was full of possibilities, including the possibility that eventually I would fall in love again?

On the other hand, I am never going to dream about this new apartment of mine.

At least, I haven't so far.

And I am never going to feel romantic about the neighborhood—although I have to say that it's much more appealing than I would have guessed. What's more, it turns out to possess many of the things that made the Apthorp so wildly attractive—proximity to an all-night newsstand, an all-night Korean grocery, and even a twenty-four-hour Kinko's. It's spring now, and I can see out the window that the pear trees are in bloom, and they're just beautiful. And, by the way, shopping for food is every bit as good on this side of town as it was on the West Side, it's much closer to the airport, the subway is better, and I'll tell you something else I've noticed about the East Side: it's sunnier, it really is, I don't know why, the light is just much lighter on the east side of town than the west. What's more, it's definitely warmer over here in winter, because it's farther from the frigid blasts of wind coming off the Hudson River. And it's much closer to all my doctors' offices, which is something you have to think about at my age, I'm sorry to say. A block from here is a place that sells the most heavenly Greek yogurt, and a block in another direction is a restaurant I could eat in every night, that's how good it is.

But it's not love. It's just where I live. ♦

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*Nora Ephron is the author of "The Most of Nora Ephron," which was published, posthumously, in 2013.*