

## FIRST APARTMENT

It was 1962. John and I had just returned from a honeymoon camping around the north shore of Lake Superior in his old VW bus from which he had removed the back seat and contrived a gerry-rigged bed. The Civil Rights Movement was then in full swing. Two years before, the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins had occurred and just a year before this a group of courageous civil rights volunteers had ridden on Greyhound buses into the Deep South. Idealism and noble purpose was in the zeitgeist of us northern whites who only watched this drama from afar and we were eager to make our own contribution to the struggle. Spurred by the idea of serving the poor, a group of young white clergy and their wives had decided to move into East Harlem, known as El Barrio, to serve churches that would be both places of worship and centers of community development. They would maintain an economic discipline, live in tenements or public housing projects in the community and send their kids to local schools, i.e., they wanted to “pass.”

John was one of those intrepid pioneers who had agreed to take Jefferson Park Parish, an old run-down building that in the early part of the century had been an Italian Methodist Church when the neighborhood, populated by immigrants from Calabria and Sicily, was known as “Little Italy.” The church sat among a row of old tenements on East 114<sup>th</sup> Street between First and Pleasant Avenues near the East River. His charge was to build a black and Puerto Rican congregation whose members would be drawn from the “Projects,” the ugly brick, high rise buildings that had risen across First Avenue—New York’s commitment to low-income housing. Infused with the same idealism about serving the poor, and living in the inner city, I had married him.

And now we were moving into our first apartment, or rather, I was moving into his—a tenement building two doors from the church. At the end of our block, on the corner of 114<sup>th</sup> and Pleasant, the latter known as one of the most famous gangland stretches in mob history, sat tiny Rao’s Restaurant the notorious Mafia hangout where NYPD cops would mingle with the likes of Lucky Luciano and John Gotti and where every decade or so another mob murder would occur, or so it was rumored. Across the street from our row of tenements was Jefferson Park, a large, recreation area that had been built in 1905 to provide organized play for the children of Little Italy. Refurbished by the New Deal, the park contained playgrounds, two gymnasiums, baths,

comfort stations, and a classical pavilion, all of which had seen better days by the time we arrived. With the disappearance of the Italians and the influx of African Americans and Puerto Ricans, Jefferson Park had become the hub of a large drug trade. It took me a while to figure out what was happening and what all those syringes were that could be found littering the park. Cars driven by white suburbanites were constantly pulling up to the curb across from our building to purchase their stash of coke or smack in discreet brown paper bags from the black and brown dealers. Every once in a while, the cops would make a raid, but the trafficking continued unabated.

I had been forewarned about what I was getting into, so I should have known. After all, before our marriage I had visited John's apartment when he was bedridden with a case of the mumps. He had been ordered by the anti-Castro Cuban doctor who came to peer into his mouth with a match to stay flat in his bed for a month and furthermore he admonished, "No Fucking!" Fucking was the last thing on John's mind when he was bedridden with the mumps and feared becoming sterile should he move an inch. Since the church was just two doors away from the apartment, John had ordered the mimeograph machine to be placed beside his bed so that he could crank out the church bulletins for whomever would be preaching on the Sundays he was bedridden. By the time I came to see him, his black beard had crept up to cover most of his face and the mimeograph machine had gotten ink all over his hands and sheets. He looked like someone who had just emerged from the Amazon jungle after having been lost for a month. In the kitchen dirty dishes covered with rotting food littered the counters and roaches were having a field day.

Nevertheless, it was a shock when, as a married woman, I stepped through the door to survey my new home. The door opened immediately into the kitchen whose linoleum floor—where it was still intact--was mottled with a black, greasy tarish substance. In our absence, plaster from the broken ceiling had covered the floor with a fine powder. As I picked up objects, a platoon of roaches would scurry away. The bathroom was next, a decrepit sink and bathtub whose calking had turned to mold and a toilet that would not flush completely. Last was the back room which would have to serve as both a living room and bedroom. Since we were in a first-floor walkup, the windows were barred and looked out on a rubble-strewn courtyard graced by one pathetic tree. The apartment, dingy and grey, had not been painted or cleaned in fifty years. And why not? John didn't really live here. For him, it was just a place to eat and sleep.

His real life was in the church or on the streets, or accompanying one of his kids to court, or knocking on the doors of parishioners in the projects.

On our first night home we slept on two iron cots under squirrely blankets that looked as if they had once sheltered a Bowery bum. In the middle of that night I was awakened by a wispy feeling of something moving on my face. Opening my eyes I realized that an army of roaches was marching across the bridge of my nose. I let out a scream and for the rest of the night lay awake wondering why I had ever turned down Tim, the heir to the Upjohn Pharmaceutical Company, to marry a minister who wanted to serve the poor.

For the next weeks I busied myself trying to get the place into livable condition. For better or worse, this was going to be my home and I had to make it into one. I was encouraged in my optimism by the fact that our next-door neighbors, Bob and Marcia, who were also part of the “Group Ministry” to which John belonged had a beautiful apartment. To be sure, their layout was different. Theirs had arches that separated the rooms, was considerably larger than ours and faced the street where there was more light. They had painted the walls a soft orange and covered the one big wall in their living room with a bookcase. I wondered how Marcia and Bob had done it on Bob’s puny Group Ministry salary. She must have had family money, I conjectured, but since we were living on John’s \$4,000 salary and neither of us had family money, renovations were out of the question. So I ordered some paint and got to work brightening the walls of our place with a soft white. We ordered a sofa bed from Sears, I made curtains for the windows, and brought in some green plants to provide some cheer for the living room-cum-bedroom.

But try as I might, I couldn’t do anything with the kitchen. The grease had settled into its pores long ago and no scrubbing would remove it. Plaster kept falling from the ceiling and with all the cracks in the apartment, no amount of spraying would get rid of the roaches. I came to hate those things. Growing up with my mother I had come to terms with ants scurrying around our kitchen counters. But roaches were another matter. They were bigger and cannier. I came to think of them as more intelligent than I. They seemed to anticipate where my hand would land even before I had brought it up to strike and could escape into a crevice only to appear again when my back was turned. Before long we were in a war together. One night Bob and Marcia came over to invite us for dinner. Taking one look at our apartment, Bob said, “John, you didn’t marry a woman, you married a magician.” The complement was cold comfort.

It is a couple of months into our marriage and I am alone in the apartment when I hear a knock on the door. Of course, an old law tenement does not have a peephole, so from behind the closed door I call out, “Who’s there?” From the other side of the door a male voice with a Hispanic accent replies, “I’m looking for the super, can I talk to you?” Not wanting to be unfriendly—after all, we are here to serve the neighborhood— but there is some foreboding at the back of my mind. Slowly, I open the door. I am staring at a knife that is pointed straight at my heart. With his other hand the man pushes me inside and slams the door. “Shut up!” he growls. “If you don’t scream I won’t hurt you.” I couldn’t scream if I’d wanted to. My tongue is stuck to my throat. He continues pushing me through the kitchen and into the livingroom/bedroom. Seizing my terrycloth bathrobe that was draped over a chair, he pushes me onto it, tying me up with its sash and gagging my mouth. Then he proceeds to wrench the diamond ring from my finger. It was a beautiful, simple stone that had been John’s mother’s engagement ring. Since we didn’t have an engagement, he had given it to me when we got married. “Where’s your jewelry box?” the man shrieks. I shake my head trying to indicate I have none. All the while I am watching him, strangely calm, as he ransacks the apartment, tearing open drawers, scattering my clothes, knocking over furniture and lamps and rifling my purse. It is as if I were watching myself in someone else’s movie.

In a matter of minutes it is over, and then he is gone. As I free myself from the chair to which he had bound me like an amnesiac returning to memory the consciousness of what has happened slowly returns. Shaking uncontrollably now I rush out of the apartment and knock frantically on Bob and Marcia’s door. No one is home. I then rush over to the church, collapsing in hysteria where John finds me.