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By Janet Martin

When New York Sidewalks Seem Close to Home

In Central Virginia's early September, the cicadas sing in the morning.

On 113th Street, Manhattan between Riverside Drive and Broadway, the gears of a garbage truck groan. Like a metal elephant, the machine rakes in its refuse. Human workers feed it, hefting black plastic bags as they shout in Spanish, English and rap.

Through the wall, a buzzing clock signals that my neighbor's day has just begun. One floor above, Maria, a new acquaintance, washes the dishes. Plates scrape, pots bang, water rushes on and off. Last night she fixed her family a Mexican dish; the perfume of onions and jalapeno peppers wafted through my open window, making me wish I'd had an invitation to dine.

Across the cement courtyard the guitar player reels back his answering machine and I hear "Ted" and wonder if that's his name. I don't know. He's called "Shut Up!" by a voice on the sixth floor when he plucks his strings past ten at night. The guitar is a base, the player, a beginner; and his quarter-note sonatas are not easy on the ear.

The neighborhood within Building 610 called Grant's Quarters is vertical. It can hardly feel more far away and different from the one I recently left. In the rural green horizontal spaces of Central Virginia, the Southwest Mountains trace the deep rich soil that brought the earliest of settlers, some with land grants from King George II.

Neighborhoods span fields and streams and mountains. Neighbors may be hundreds of acres or several hundred yards apart.

By contrast, in the student section of New York's Morningside Heights district, neighbors are a few feet away. Window curtains are rare, and unwittingly one can spy or be spied upon as the windows face each other or blackened brick walls.

Mid-career, I have come to enter school again. Having raised three children in Charlottesville, and having settled the youngest son at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va. this fall, I confronted the empty nest, squawked and decided to fly away myself. Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism became my roost.

My college-freshman son was taken aback. He'd planned for me to anchor the home. He'd envisioned my surveying his abandoned, uncluttered room, tearfully staring, I suppose, at his solid high school trophies, mooning over the pictures of his winning teams, listening to the silence where the boom box once roared. He thought I might cook his favorite chicken casserole once a month when he returned from college to visit his childhood unchanged. It's a nice image, I admit. But considering that his older brother moved to Chicago and returns only for Christmas and Charlottesville's Foxfield Races twice a year, and his older sister lives in Colorado and comes home even less, I reasoned that youngest son's appearance would be seasonal at best.

Consequently, instead of mooning over memories, I moved a few of his momentos to New York.

It was important to move only *a few* of anything . . . a few towels, a few antiques, a few dishes and about four pots and pans. From a Virginia home of nearly 3,000 square feet on six acres to a New York City 800- square- foot walk-up resembling a boxcar, my

husband and I discovered that moving anything *at all* provoked much intellectual pondering.

Will it fit?

Do we really need it?

Why hang pictures if we're there only nine months?

Are you really taking the life-sized portraits of all three kids? FCC held his pencil like a question over a diagram of the apartment—smaller somehow than the diagram led us to believe.

We discussed the situation with a Columbia housing official—Ms. M.

“I don't believe it's adequate,” I said across her desk in my most polite manner. “The living room area is a subway compartment. I mean, I have this antique dining room table—

“Store it.” Ms. M. thumped a pencil. She smiled, seemingly amused, as if I were a 2,000 year-old princess resurrected from the Euphrates River dynasty of Ur.

“No one,” she shook her head, “has a dining room table in New York. The apartments are designed for students. And frankly,” she added, not unkindly, what you've been assigned is as good as it gets. Consider this year, “ she pointed her pencil eraser in our direction, “as urban camping “

So we did as Mrs. M. advised, stored the dining table and instead, packed a small mahogany gateleg table, which could fit in a tent, if need be. With it we lugged along four matching primitive American chairs acquired in Charlottesville.

Upon arriving, we walked the quadrangle of Columbia University, originally chartered as King's College by George II in 1754. Small world that he was the same fellow who had generously granted farm tracts to my Charlottesville neighbors. Heading

to our neighborhood two blocks away, we acquired a New York education, not on campus, but on the streets.

My son and a college friend had double-parked our moving van, a U-Haul, in front of the column porch of Grant Quarters. Hometown friends had warned us to watch the truck as we unloaded, lest someone steal our belongings. My husband, FCC, pulled out one of the early American wooden chairs and took a seat by the front step as first watch. Our furnishings marched in on the shoulders of the young men. Boxes, lamps, sofas and bookshelves traveled one flight up to our closet apartment. There, over opened boxes and packing paper strewn around, I lamented afresh how small the place was and wondered where, oh where, would I put the vacuum cleaner?

Exhausted by noon, FCC dispatched the boys off for a pizza, readily found among the ethnic restaurants strung like brightly colored beads along Broadway. Centered around a boxed pizza on the gateleg table, we pulled up our chairs: one, two, three . . . Then we looked around, and the conversation went like this:

Where's the fourth chair?

I don't know.

It's on the street.

No, it isn't

Did you see it when you came back with the pizza?

No.

A yawn of dawning flitted across the male faces.

You think it's been *stolen* ?

We raced outside. FCC pointed to the front porch step bordered by a tall, wrought iron fence.

It was there, he said.

No more.

I can't believe someone stole my chair, I wailed.

This is New York. FCC's voice was tired.

It's one of a set. It matches the others. Who needs *three* matching chairs? I'm inconsolable. The luster of the day has just dimmed.

I saw someone picking through the garbage along the street, my son shuddered. How poor can you get?

Yeah, his friend agreed. Somebody could pawn a chair.

It makes me feel unsafe, I said. So un-neighborly. . . like vultures watching, ready to swoop.

Well, New York is not Charlottesville, FCC was resigned.

Wearily, we continued to unpack. Later, in the hall our Irish neighbor stopped by. I'd heard his alarm go off in the morning.

Up early to write, Decklan smiled.

I recounted our stolen chair story.

Welcome to New York, his tone was sarcastic. Then he paused. Where did you leave it?

On the sidewalk.

A shadow of realization crossed his eyes. Ahhhh, people decorate their apartments with sidewalk stuff, he said slowly. An unwritten law says sidewalk furniture unattended is available and free. You might leave a note

Dubious, but having nothing to lose, I scored a magic marker across a flattened cardboard box:

Dear New Neighbors, the note read. If you took a small brown chair by mistake today—Saturday—please return it to Grant Quarters. It's part of our dining set. Thank you.

The three men stood in a circle and laughed as I roped the poster-sized note onto the wrought-iron fence near the front step.

You think anybody's gonna return that chair?

Mom, this is really embarrassing!

The afternoon wore on. Finally the U-Haul was empty. We sat among boxes towering closely like cardboard stalactites in the tiny living room.

What do you say we get out of here and go for Chinese food? FCC suggested.

We all nodded.

Scrambling down the steps down for the 400th time this day and out the double heavy glass doors to the pedestal porch of Grant Quarters my son—in front-- stopped. We bumped into him, a chain of human fender benders.

Look! He pointed. We looked.

There, nestled by the wrought-iron fence where it had vanished during the afternoon, sat the small brown primitive chair.

The next morning the sounds were the same, Decklan's alarm clock, Maria's dishes, Ted's answering machine, the garbage truck—even on Sunday. But there also was another sound:

Bells. The church bells on Broadway.

At last, I sighed, something familiar, something like Charlottesville. But also, I'd discovered, there was comforting familiarity in something else:

When Virginia-style neighborly kindness spans state lines, New York does not seem such a long way from home.

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