

Reluctantly Embracing the Upper East Side

By LYNN ERMANN NOV. 11, 2007



AN ECLECTIC MIX Town houses and buildings in all styles give texture to Upper East Side streets like East 82nd between Madison and Park. Michael Falco for The New York Times

FOR years, I lied about where I lived. At parties in neighborhoods like Williamsburg or the East Village, I would pretend that the apartment I occupied on East 74th Street actually belonged to my grandmother, not to me. New acquaintances would nod sympathetically at my sad predicament, at my being forced to live on the Upper East Side.

The truth, too shameful to admit, was that in 1995, at age 24, I bought an apartment in a neighborhood that I and everyone I knew considered bland, conformist and kind of a bore. My friends came up here only to be hospitalized or to visit their parents or grandmothers.

I grew up on the Upper East Side. In 1982, after stints in [Brooklyn](#), the Upper West Side, Virginia and [Queens](#), my father and I moved to 86th between York and East End Avenues. I was 11. My father was raising me on his own then

and wanted me to be closer to my maternal grandmother, who was about to start putting me through private school.

Grandma Bea's stately prewar apartment building was right off Fifth Avenue, a block from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On Friday nights, we met for dinner, for stilted conversation at stuffy French restaurants where the entrees arrived covered by silver domes that were lifted by waiters in white.

The year of our move, I met Sue, my future stepmother, for the first time over a burger, fries and a thick slab of chocolate-chip cake at J. G. Melon, at 74th Street and Third Avenue. She lived right across the avenue from Melon's. She also lived across the street from where I live today.



Apartment buildings along Fifth Avenue. Michael Falco for The New York Times

Sue married my father and moved in with us, in Yorkville, a quiet part of the Upper East Side that was at that time still a German immigrant enclave, with 86th Street as the main thoroughfare.

When my father's mother, Grandma Eva, visited from Queens, she took me for lunch at Cafe Geiger and to the many sweets shops for Sacher tortes, almond horns dipped in chocolate and plump marzipan pigs.

As a child, I didn't think much about where we lived, partly because I spent most of my waking hours at a private school in the [Bronx](#). My best friend, Liz, was one stop away on the school bus, at 79th Street. On snow days, we dragged sleds up to Central Park. In high school, we jogged along the East River promenade or hung out at the Met, where I had been going with my father for years.

By the time I returned to the neighborhood after college, big-box stores had taken over 86th Street; Grandma Bea had died; my parents were in [Westchester](#); Grandma Mary (Sue's mom) had relocated from Queens to our old 86th Street apartment; and everyone I knew, all my artist and writer friends, lived below 14th Street.

I did, too — for a while — until my parents' requirement that I live in a doorman building made it cost-prohibitive. So I relented and rented a tiny studio in a boxy postwar building near Second Avenue on 79th Street. I felt isolated.



A landmark restaurant. Michael Falco for The New York Times

Just as I was planning my escape, I came into a small inheritance from Grandma Eva, enough to buy an apartment. My eagle-eyed parents saw a real estate listing for an apartment in a safe neighborhood in a doorman building on a street that Sue knew well.

“You can sell it in a few years and buy a bigger place in another neighborhood,” Sue, my real estate savvy stepmom, said reassuringly.

I agreed, reluctantly, to what I considered to be a minor detour on the way to my dream apartment. I told myself

it was an investment, no more. I wasn't ready to make a commitment to any apartment for the long haul anyway.

When I moved into the 74th Street apartment, J. G. Melon was still there, in a tenement painted forest green, with its trademark two-story-high neon sign anchoring the block. It was full to capacity every night.

Other glimpses of my new neighborhood confirmed that I would never fit in. On weekends, men in rumpled French-blue oxfords and close-cropped hair jammed into sports bars on Second. On Lexington, I spotted Adolfo-clad matrons reminiscent of Bea, and I instinctively tried to fix my unruly hair.



Lynn Pressman Raymond at her afternoon reading. Michael Falco for The New York Times

For my first few years on 74th Street, I familiarized myself mostly with the crosstown bus stop at 79th. I was dating a West Sider who was allergic to my cat.

I also wanted to avoid being home. My apartment was actually packed with two apartments' worth of furniture from my grandmother. I was always tripping over a wobbly antique end table or catching an unsettling glimpse of myself in a mottled green mirror.

Adding to the Miss Havisham air of decay was the depressing deterioration of the apartment itself. I didn't live there, so why should I get new air-conditioners or fix the sink or right the lopsided blinds? Why should I even get to know my neighbors? They were Upper East Siders. It was *so obvious* we would have nothing in common.

While I may have wished I were somewhere else, I still had to buy Kitty Litter and detergent. East of Third, amid an intermittently charming hodgepodge of high-rises, tenements and prewar apartment buildings familiar to me from childhood were all manner of conveniences useful to a grown-up. Within a few months, I had settled into a pleasant rhythm, and the dry cleaner became my dry cleaner, the fruit stand my fruit stand, the tailor my tailor, the polling place my polling place. Maybe this was my first attachment to the neighborhood.

The commutes to other neighborhoods continued. Next came the stifling No. 6 to the L to Williamsburg. Meanwhile, my cousin Melissa moved across Third Avenue on 74th, and we began to jog together mornings around the reservoir in Central Park. Sue, who had started staying over at the 86th Street apartment with her mom two nights a week, met me for early orange-brioche breakfasts at Payard Pâtisserie & Bistro (1032 Lexington Avenue, near 73rd Street).



The selection at Payard Pâtisserie & Bistro. Michael Falco for The New York Times

The Williamsburg romance ended. A documentary project I was working on unraveled. I was broke. All my friends were in Brooklyn. I stayed home more. At night, taking a break from deadlines, I walked down Madison and peered in the windows of Carolina Herrera, Prada, Ungaro, Chloé and J. Mendel with a mix of delight and envy.

It was on Madison that I also found relief in the excellent consignment shops, the repositories of the “wear it once” chic Upper East Side socialites. Michael’s (1041 Madison Avenue, near 79th Street) is my favorite (I would later buy my wedding dress there).

I started to enjoy exploring the rest of the neighborhood, too. Six years after my arrival, I realized that my apartment was right between two disparate Upper East Sides: the one my parents lived in — the one offering services and affordable restaurants — and the one my Grandma Bea inhabited, which is

the one I associated with snobbism.

Now I also saw the beauty and surprising quirkiness of the Park Avenue side.

It is the mix of town houses and prewar and postwar buildings in all styles, colors and textures that makes the Upper East Side between Lexington and Fifth Avenues, in the historic district, so singular. I was surprised by how varied the town houses were, that one with a Greek Revival facade might be right next to a stately brownstone. A Federal-style clunker is smack up against a lighter-than-air Italian villa.

On meandering walks, I returned to the Met. After too many cringe-worthy gallery shows and Whitney Biennials, it was time. I paid \$1 (admission is *suggested*) and wandered. I went back to the knights of my childhood, to the Northern Renaissance paintings that I adored in high school, and I stepped through the porthole of Astor Court, a Chinese garden where I sat with my frail Grandma Bea in 1988 just before I went off to college. We had held hands and listened to the trickle of water. Now I listened again.



The main staircase at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Michael Falco for The New York Times

I kept going back to the Met, alone and with Jonathan. When we started dating in 2002, Jonathan lived in [Harlem](#), so naturally I started commuting again. This time was different, though. He commuted, too.

Jonathan had no hang-ups about the Upper East Side. He said it was a “noisy minority” who packed into a few restaurants on Third and Second. Together, we discovered Cafe Mingala (1393 Second Avenue, near 72nd Street), a Burmese restaurant with a lovingly rendered mural of the country’s cities. We found excellent Turkish, Thai, Italian and French restaurants in all directions.

Through Jonathan, I came to know my neighbors. Some worked in retailing or publishing or public relations, while others were doctors or lawyers or, gasp, worked on Wall Street. That was fine. It was refreshing to meet people with concrete, impressive accomplishments. After years of loft and rooftop parties and aggressive quirkiness, I was O.K. with a neighborhood that didn’t scream, “I’m different!”

In early 2005, Jonathan and I decided to get married. It was time to sell the apartment and find that bigger place in another neighborhood. We scouted around near his apartment in Harlem and in prewar apartment buildings east of Third where the prices were lower and the ceilings higher.

We hit an unexpected hurdle: Board approval anywhere would be near impossible since we're both freelancers. So Jonathan and I stood in the foyer of the 74th Street apartment and asked: Can we make this work?

I kept only a few pieces of Grandma Bea's furniture, enough to remind me of her, and sold the rest. Without the clutter, the apartment looked a lot more promising. We started over. We bought new furniture. We repaired everything. We painted, papered and put up molding — ourselves.

On a wall in the living room, adjacent to the window, we installed a long, narrow mirror to reflect the view of water towers and rooftop gardens, of town houses and tenements, of pre- and postwar brick apartment buildings, the singular skyline of our Upper East Side.