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## To Her Not-Quite Friends

Every few years, she migrates to another city. But New York may be different, thanks to all the bit players in her life.



Lisa Haney/The New York Times

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I 'VE been here for five years now. That means, if it all goes according to pattern, I'll be gone in a few months. It wasn't always like this: changing cities every five years, living in sublets or temporary housing and never knowing where I was going next until I got there. The problem started when I was a young adult in Los Angeles, then took me to Paris, then London and now here. It's not that I ever wanted to run away. Rather, I always wanted to go somewhere.

To get to where I am now, you find the three-story walk-up on West 11th Street with the peeling white paint, you struggle with the two front locks and then you give the door a hard shove. Take the deteriorating staircase — don't lean on the railing — up one flight. To reach my room, you enter my friend's office and walk past a set of double doors. No, I'm not a student, and this is not a sad story. This is one of the best homes I've ever had. To be honest, I'm completely in love. I've been in love with other cities before and have left them all.

My hope in telling you about my idiosyncrasy of changing cities is that I'll end up staying instead of going. I'd like to stay in New York, but it's a hard habit to break if you've been going somewhere all your life. And then, it's not as if anyone's gotten on a knee or two and asked me to stay. That said, I do have a secure relationship with a man. It's been

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going on since the day I arrived in the West Village. The most consistent man in my life is my mailman. Thomas Duffy is the nicest person I've ever met although I hardly know a thing about him. He's older, gray, mustachioed and, from what I understand, a family man. He smiles in all weather, and I've never once heard him complain, not even after he went into the hospital for a few weeks.

I sometimes find Mr. Duffy's exuberance overwhelming. When I feel that way, I cross to the other side of the street when I see him coming. Then I look forward to the day when I'll be back on his side of the street because, as the expression goes, the neighborhood isn't quite the same without him.

The short, tough woman who lives in the basement is my landlord. Evie Hamilton turned 80 this year, although we did not celebrate her birthday together. She owns two brownstones and shares a third with her sister. When I go see Evie in her dark, antique-cluttered, Fenton-glass-and-Bjorn-Winblad-ceramic-filled basement, it is usually a visit related to landlord-tenant issues. She invariably shows me her collection of used books. Her favorites are old-fashioned romance novels, but she admits that romance isn't in anymore. She knows I write short stories and has delicately mentioned more than once that nobody reads short stories anymore either — hoping, perhaps, to encourage me onto a more commercial path.

Evie is always busy, always in a hurry. Neither her broken shoulder nor her multiple eye surgeries have slowed her down. Last year, she was named volunteer of the year by St. Vincent's Hospital Manhattan, where she has devoted much of her time for 18 years. Evie told me that if it weren't for her mother, who spent her last years in the same basement, she would never have moved to the Village. Her mother loved artists, and that's how they came to live there. It was in the mid-1950's that her mother planted what she thought were two dwarf crab apple trees in the garden. It turned out they weren't miniatures, but grew into gigantic, beautiful twins that reach far beyond our third floor.

Of course, not everybody stays in New York. At the laundry across the street, there once worked a woman from Singapore who barely spoke English. I knew her name was Ying because when I asked, she wrote it down for me on a piece of paper. She used to sit in the front window and mend clothes, and we always acknowledged each other's presence.

I'd go see her after a thrift-store spree, taking my finds to her for alterations. She transformed one peach dress into a masterpiece; her eyes lit up when she saw me slip it on. She also used to scold me for bad purchases, showing me how poorly a piece of clothing had been made.

The front window has been empty for months now. Irene, who manages the place and speaks even less English, explained as best she could that Ying had returned to Singapore to take care of her son's newborn. Funny how you can miss someone you barely know.

Once a month, I make a food run for Boo, my overweight cat, to Pet Palace, on West 10th Street. Its two small rooms are presided over by O. J., an elderly yellow cat who sleeps all the time.

The three young men who work in the store are from Algeria. The one I know best is Nouredine, who has been there about three years and has dark, warm eyes. He's probably in his 30's, with black bangs that hover just above his thick eyebrows. We don't talk much, but we have learned that our moods are usually in sync. If one of us is feeling good, so is the other; if one of us is tired, the other will be too. If we are worried about world events, which we are constantly, then we worry together.

My chiropractor is also on West 10th Street, but he's much more than a doctor to me. We got to know each other as I lay on the examining table in his office, where he mended 20 years' worth of back problems. Dr. John Reagan's former lover and still best friend, Dr. Vincent Martino, is his business partner. A framed cartoon of the dynamic duo as superheroes hangs in their bathroom with the words: "Fighting to keep New York free of pain, stress and injury."

**W**HETHER we're up for seeing each other or not, I see Doc Reagan just about everywhere — on random street corners as well as at our gym. Often, he's listening to his iPod. Sometimes, he takes out his earpiece and puts it up to my ear so I can hear what he's hearing. Other times, I might get an a cappella stanza or two from a number he's rehearsing for the Gay Men's Chorus, of which he is a member.

The two doctors used to share custody of Clarence, a blond Labrador named after the chiropractic pioneer Clarence Gonstead. Clarence died earlier this year, just a few weeks after my father, whom I barely knew, also died. I could see that Dr. Reagan was more torn up about Clarence than I was about my father. Maybe more to the point, of all these people I don't know so well, I knew my father even less.

There are others, of course, in my private collection of people I don't know very well. Everybody has a unique collection. The attractive postal worker, the homeless man with the voice of an angel, the preacher outside the church, the men of Two Boots, the women of the restaurant Ma Ma Buddha, the volunteers at our voting booths, the thus-far-unknown actors at the theater around the corner and the domino players of Washington Square Park.

None of these people have asked me to stay in New York. They don't know my problems and I don't know theirs. But just by knowing them in a not-knowing-them kind of way, I hear them quietly invite me to stay. And, quietly, I reply, "Thank you, I'll give it a try."

*Johanna Baldwin is an independent writer and producer.*