

Upstairs, Downstairs, Upstairs

Some Are Born to Live in a Brownstone; Some Just Endure It

By JOHANNA GARFIELD

EVEN before we moved from our cozy, albeit crowded, apartment into our brownstone, I had my doubts. I remember distinctly that moment when, flanked by our three young children, I looked up, up, up through the opening in our semicircular staircase-to-be, and imagined putting them to bed on the fourth floor after a day of sibling squabbles and mashed potatoes on the kitchen floor. The prospect did not fill me with enthusiasm.

I tried to repress such negative thoughts. The soothing flattery of friends helped. "I always wanted one, but Jack's such a stick-in-the-mud," one said with a sigh. "He has no imagination." Could I admit that my imagination might be mud-bound too? Or that it ran toward depressing visions of hauling laundry up staircases instead of holding gracious soirées?

Besides, other people lived in brownstones quite happily, I told myself. The former owners, let's call them Mr. and Mrs. Dudley Crawford, raised their three children in our house, and they all survived, apparently unscathed. More important, my husband loved the idea. "All that space," he marveled. "It can't be matched at the price." I didn't remind him that "all that space" was mostly vertical. "Let's just try it for six months," he persisted. "If you don't like it, we'll move."

Again I tried to squelch my doubts. But the next time I saw Mrs. Crawford, a daunting member of the Establishment if ever I saw one, I couldn't contain my misgivings. Awkwardly, I blurted, "But what about the stairs?"

She looked at me uncomprehendingly and said, with just a touch of contempt, "Well, what about the stairs?"

That is when I had my epiphany: She and I were different breeds. Just

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as there are city people and country people, people who eat to live and the other kind (I'm one), there are brownstoners (my husband and Mrs. Crawford) and apartment-ites (me). The differences are unmistakable:

- Brownstoners are well-organized, have good memories and never leave their glasses or the plumber's unlisted number three flights up.

- They head straight for the staircase in museums or similar huge edifices, while apartment-ites cravenly sneak off to find the escalator.

- Possessed of high energy levels

ing in a rerun of "Upstairs Downstairs." By contrast, misplaced apartment-ites fume at their mate as they check the roast. They later invoke happy memories of the apartment, when guests, children and dog were all within earshot.

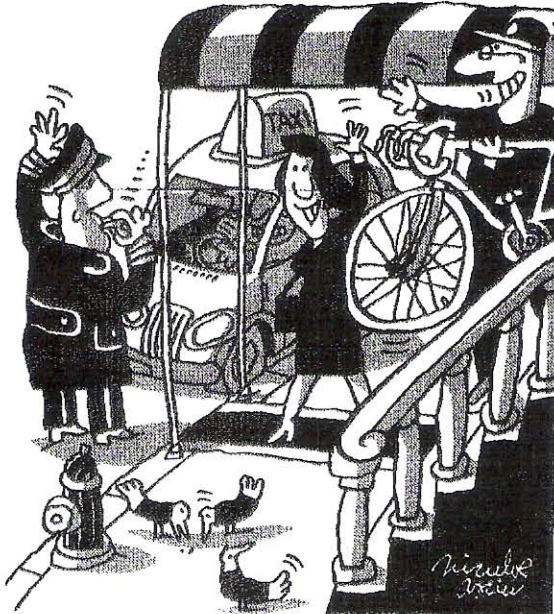
- Brownstoners resented waiting for the elevator in the apartment house and having to converse with neighbors when it came. They were uncomfortable exchanging pleasantries with the doorman. Apartment-ites consider these two of the nicer aspects of apartment living.

- Because they have renounced such chatty guardians of their safety as doormen, brownstoners willingly plunge a small fortune into alarm systems and gates. These make any departure or return about as easy as visiting a relative at Sing-Sing. But since brownstoners basically regard themselves as pioneers defending their homesteads, they are untroubled by the inconvenience and revel in discussing the merits of such systems with others of their kind. Nor does looking at their garden through heavy metal bars diminish their enjoyment of its beauties. Apartment-ites find the gates claustrophobic, cannot master the alarm and felt safer in the apartment anyway.

- An exception to brownstoners' loner characteristics is the patience they display in dealing with the never-ending stream of repairs necessitated by their antique dwellings. Apartment-ites prefer to call the super.

So think carefully before you and your mate succumb to a brownstone's nostalgic allure. You are in trouble if you discover too late that neither of you possesses the brownstoner gene. But you may be headed straight for divorce court if one does and the other doesn't.

Not us yet, although that six-month trial period somehow extended to three decades. But "mixed marriages" like ours can be explained: Given the essentially idle nature of apartment-ites, the only thing we'd like even less than living vertically would be to have to pack up our three to five floors and move.



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