

lated cable he'd hot-wired off a utility pole down the block. "We're all getting free juice, thanks to your father," Mom said. "No one in the building could survive without him."

Dad chuckled modestly. He told me how complicated the process had been, because the wiring in the building was so ancient. "Damnedest electrical system I've ever seen," he said. "The manual must have been written in hieroglyphics."

I looked around, and it hit me that if you replaced the electric heaters with a coal stove, this squat on the Lower East Side looked pretty much like the house on Little Hobart Street. I had escaped from Welch once, and now, breathing in those same old smells of turpentine, dog hair, and dirty clothes, of stale beer and cigarette smoke and unrefrigerated food slowly going bad, I had the urge to bolt. But Mom and Dad were clearly proud, and as I listened to them talk—interrupting each other in their excitement to correct points of fact and fill in gaps in the story—about their fellow squatters and the friends they'd made in the neighborhood and the common fight against the city's housing agency, it became clear they'd stumbled on an entire community of people like themselves, people who lived unruly lives battling authority and who liked it that way. After all those years of roaming, they'd found home.

I graduated from Barnard that spring. Brian came to the ceremony, but Lori and Maureen had to work, and Mom said it would just be a lot of boring speeches about the long and winding road of life. I wanted Dad to come, but chances were he'd show up drunk and try to debate the commencement speaker.

"I can't risk it, Dad," I told him.

"Hell," he said. "I don't have to see my Mountain Goat grabbing a sheepskin to know she's got her college degree."

The magazine where I'd been working two days a week had offered me a full-time job. What I needed was a place to live. For several years, I had been dating a man named Eric, a friend of one of Lori's eccentric genius friends, who came from a wealthy family, ran a small company, and lived alone in the apartment on Park Avenue in which he'd been raised. He was a detached, almost fanatically organized guy who maintained detailed time-management logs and could recite endless baseball

**A MONTH LATER**, I got a call from Mom. She was so excited she was tripping over her own words. She and Dad had found a place to live. Their new home, Mom said, was in an abandoned building on the Lower East Side. "It's a tad run-down," she admitted. "But all it really needs is a little TLC. And best of all, it's free."

Other folks were also moving into abandoned buildings, she said. They were called squatters, and the buildings were called squats. "Your father and I are pioneers," Mom said. "Just like my great-great-grandfather, who helped tame the Wild West."

Mom called in a few weeks and said that although the squat still needed a few finishing touches—a front door, for example—she and Dad were officially accepting visitors. I took the subway to Astor Place on a late spring day and headed east. Mom and Dad's apartment was in a six-story walk-up. The mortar was crumbling and bricks had come loose. All the windows on the first floor had been boarded up. I reached to open the building's front door, but where the lock and handle should have been, there was only a hole. Inside, a single naked lightbulb hung from a wire in the hallway. On one wall, chunks of plaster had crumbled away, revealing the wooden ribs and pipes and wiring. On the third floor, I knocked on the door to Mom and Dad's apartment and heard Dad's muffled voice. Instead of the door swinging inward, fingers appeared on both sides, and it was lifted out of the frame altogether. There was Dad, beaming and hugging me while he went on about how he'd yet to install door hinges. As a matter of fact, they'd only just gotten the door itself, which he'd found in the basement of another abandoned building.

Mom came running up behind him, grinning so widely you could see her molars, and gave me a big hug. Dad knocked a cat off a chair—they had already taken in a few strays—and offered me a seat. The room was crammed with broken furniture, bundles of clothes, stacks of books, and Mom's art supplies. Four or five electric space heaters blasted away. Mom explained that Dad had hooked up every squat in the building to an insu-