

68 & Riverside

by Andrew Shelden

Martin met Siena in the elevator, carrying two brown bags of groceries. She asked him to press the button for floor eight. As they rose, Martin fixed his eyes on the display as it changed numbers: G, 2, 3... and so on. Siena put the bags down and dug through her purse to retrieve her keys. She was probably twenty-three or -four, Martin figured, younger than his son by a few years. She had long, straight brown hair and thick-framed black glasses. She wore jeans ripped at the knees and a tight-fitting white t-shirt that read "Bored Whores" in black print, with a large-breasted woman slouching up against the "B." When they reached the eighth floor, the elevator stopped and the door opened. He offered to help her with her bags but she said no thanks. Martin watched her walk down the hall until the door closed.

A week later, Martin had just finished his orthopedic back exercises and was sifting through his mail when he found a personal letter addressed to Ginnie Gildersleeve, the woman who lived below him in 8C. They had struck up a casual friendship over the years after countless mail exchanges and impromptu elevator meetings. She was pleasant enough, but he never felt compelled to learn more about her than he already knew: that she lived alone with her Pekinese, Mercedes, that she had no children and that she worked for years as an assistant to a rather famous theater producer, first in Chicago and then in New York. Still sweating from his workout, Martin jogged down the flight of stairs to deliver her letter. He could have just slipped it under the door, of course, but he decided to knock.

When the door opened, Martin stood awkwardly looking at the young woman he had encountered in the elevator a week earlier. He might not have recognized her, but, improbably, she was wearing the same t-shirt.

"I'm looking for Ginnie," he said. "Is she in?"

"No, she's not." The young woman tilted her head. He tried to look past her diamond-studded nose into the apartment. "Is there a message you'd like me to give her?"

"I received some of her mail in my box." He waved the letter in his hand. "I live upstairs."

"I can take it for her."

"Do you live with her?" Martin asked.

"No. Ginnie's gone for a while."

"Is she ok?"

"It's just some family business."

"So you're staying here?"

"Right. I'm house-sitting."

"Great." He forced a smile and offered his hand. "I'm Martin, Martin Hamilton."

"Nice to meet you, Martin. I'm Siena."

He looked down at her feet. Her toes were painted purple.

"Welcome to the building, Siena. I'm right above you in 9C, if you need anything."

"That's neighborly of you, Martin."

Another voice came from within the apartment. Siena began to close the door and Martin saw a young man sitting on the couch wearing a black beret turned backwards, his beard unevenly shaved, his feet pulled under his knees. Smoke streamed from his mouth.

"I told you not to do that in here," he heard her say as she closed the door. Seconds later, music curled into the hallway. Martin lingered there for a moment longer, still holding the letter. He could have slipped it under the door, but instead he held onto it.

Martin always had trouble sleeping, but in the days that followed he was bothered more than usual by the voices he heard coming through the floor. When you live in an apartment building, you get used to certain patterns of noise. This was his theory, anyhow, whether they were actual patterns or just accumulations of discrete events did not matter much. Any sound or smell or weight or light or

frequency that fell outside those established patterns was disruptive. It would break the equilibrium. Martin couldn't locate the source definitively, but something in his natural ecology was imbalanced. So even after the noises stopped each night—the voices from below, the music, the sound of footsteps, the sirens from Second Avenue—he continued to roll side-to-side and front-to-back. He slept in fits until the first hint of sunlight, and then he would have no choice but to get out of bed.

His days were slow and solitary. He was retired and had been for a few years. During those sleep-deprived mornings that seemed to last seven or eight hours, he tried reading to pass the time—first the *Wall Street Journal*, then the *Times*, and sometimes the *Daily News*, but only for the sports writing. When he was finished with the papers, he would settle in his coffee-stained leather chair by the living room window and slowly page through books on American History, a hobby he had picked up only since his son had begun his PhD candidacy two years before. In the afternoons Martin took walks, sometimes through the park, but mostly along the streets. His neighborhood was filled with familiar faces—the Korean woman with the arthritic hip in the window of the hair salon, the black woman with long braided hair working the counter at the drug store, the turbaned Afghani man grilling kabobs on York and 76th. They all knew him. Sometimes they waved or said hello in a familiar way.

He usually cooked dinner for himself and did the crossword while he ate—sometimes it was hard to save the crossword until later in the day, but he always found it more rewarding to wait. The daily puzzles he could do in a sitting, but he had to work on the weekend edition in piecemeal, often not finishing at all. Sometimes he pictured himself as a younger man, when he stayed up late reviewing market figures and Betsy would come by his desk in that pale pink zip-up nightgown she used to wear and say, “you really need to find a hobby.” He hoped she would be proud of him, now that he was all hobbies. At the very least, they made the days go by.

Martin decided to visit the eighth floor again a week after his first conversation with Siena. The noises had quieted some, but he still couldn't make it soundly through the night. He thought a conversation about respect and thoughtfulness might improve the situation.

Even as he stood in front of the door to 8C, he could hear faint murmurs of music from behind the walls. Moments later, Siena answered his knock.

"Hi again." She was easier on Martin's eyes this time, clad in dark dress pants and an off-purple button-down Oxford, untucked. "More mail?"

"No, ha," Martin tried to make himself laugh. "I came to see Ginnie, I guess. She's not back yet?"

"Nope."

"Oh, ok." Martin turned to go, suddenly incapable of making the point he'd intended to make.

"Martin, did you get a newspaper this morning?"

He stopped and looked at her. "Yes," he answered. "I got three, actually."

"Do you always get three?"

"Well, yes."

"Oh, ok. Because I didn't get mine today and I was wondering if it was just me, or if it was a building thing."

"Must be just you," he said.

"Or maybe you stole mine?"

"What?" Martin shrank back.

"Hey, relax," she said, smiling, brushing her hand on his arm. "I was just kidding."

"Oh." Martin's body warmed to her touch. "I get it."

"Actually, would you mind helping me with something? You look like you're in pretty good shape for an older guy. I'd like to move the couch a little and it's a sleeper, so it's really heavy."

For the first time Siena opened the door wider than her body and Martin could see into the apartment. It had been cleaned since the last time he had been inside. Things had been moved around, the

carpet had been stripped down to the wood, new furniture was in place; even the walls had been repainted. He found it hard to believe that Ginnie would make all of these improvements—and they were improvements. She had always struck him as one of those people who was averse to change; afraid of it, even.

“I just want to move it from here to here,” Siena said, moving inside and pointing out the couch, “off the wall, so I can put this table behind it.”

Martin took his place at one end of the couch and they lifted it, moved it a few feet, then put it down. Even that minimal effort made his back ache.

“Thank you so much.” Siena smiled. “Can I repay you with a drink?”

“Oh no, I don't want to intrude.”

“No intrusion at all. I should get to know my neighbors. Why don't you sit.” She gestured to the couch.

“I can't stay too long,” Martin insisted.

“How about a beer? Or a glass of wine?”

“I was just drinking wine with dinner,” he acquiesced.

“Good.” Siena disappeared into the kitchen and returned with two empty glasses crisscrossing in one hand and a bottle in the other. She sat in the adjacent armchair and took the lead in the conversation.

“Ginnie was my babysitter when I was a little girl in Chicago. She used to pick me up from school and make me eggs for dinner, stuff like that. She was great.”

“I just assumed you were family.”

“No, but she's more like family to me than anyone else. You know how that is?”

Martin took a sip from his glass and nodded. Siena kept talking like that for a while, offering him a steady stream of personal details while Martin occasionally interjected a quick comment or question. He grew more at ease as he finished his first glass of wine.

"Ginnie knew what a shitbox I was living in in Brooklyn, so she said I could stay here while she was gone. She's taking care of her brother, did I mention that?"

"I don't think you did."

"Yeah, so I'm here. It's a nice place. I mean, it's hard getting used to a new place and I've never lived by myself before, so that's weird, but. . ."

"You said you're here by yourself?"

"Yeah. Well, most of the time anyway. Sometimes there's this guy."

"The guy I saw here last week?"

"Yeah, right. You saw him. He's something, right?"

"What's his name?"

"Jake. Jake Boyd. We met in Madrid, of all places. I was studying there for a semester. He's like twelve years older than me. Nothing but trouble, my mom says. But what does she know anyway? When I finished school I moved here to be near him. I was smart enough not to live *with* him though, you know? Plus he lives in SoHo and I could never afford that. Hey, wait a second... Martin," she pointed her wine glass accusingly at him, "this can't be interesting for you. I'm almost boring myself here."

"It's ok, really. It's like listening to my daughter."

"You have a daughter?"

"No, that was a figure of speech. But I have a son."

"But you don't know me at all, Martin. You have to admit this is a little weird, me going on and on about my life. I mean, I'm cool with it, I wouldn't be saying all this stuff if I wasn't cool with it, I'm just saying. . ."

"I admit nothing," he said, pausing, "except that I have to use the bathroom."

They both laughed and Martin got up and refreshed her wine glass before he went to the bathroom. In there, he smiled at himself as he washed his hands and patted his hair down in the back. When he came back out in the living room, Siena had thrown herself over the length of the sofa, her feet propped up on the armrest. Martin didn't know what to do.

"I took your seat, which means you have to sit in the interrogation chair now."

"That's fine," he said, looking her over. "I'm not scared. Fire when ready."

"You said you have a son, are you married?"

"I *was* married. And my son's name is Michael. He lives in Atlanta. He's getting his PhD at Georgia Tech in US History."

"Hey, good for him. I was always bad at history, I could never remember the dates of things. What about your wife?"

"She died a couple years ago. Cervical cancer. Her name is Betsy."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Martin. I just figured you were divorced like everyone else."

"Yeah, no. It's ok. I've gotten used to talking about her in that way."

Martin started thinking about Betsy then. He used to think about her every minute. The memories were rarely bad or painful, they were just there, all the time. Now he didn't think about missing her or loving her anymore, he just thought about *her*—the way she did things or said things to him, or to other people, to Michael. It was the strangest thing; the more time passed, the more the general thoughts of her slipped away and in their place he remembered these very little, specific moments or habits.

"Tell me about her," Siena asked after he had been silent a while.

"There's too much to tell. I wouldn't know where to start."

"Why don't you tell me how you met her then, if you want to."

He inhaled a deep breath. "Well, we met on a train. I enlisted in the army right after Korea and they stationed me in Samoa for a few years, in the middle of the Pacific. At the end of my tour they shipped me back to California and I was all set to fly home to Connecticut when I decided to take a train instead. I got on in Oakland and we chugged through the desert in the blistering heat for like three days, I remember that. It was a sleeping train and there were private cars, but it wasn't luxurious. I wish I could tell you more about it, what I thought or things I saw, to make the story better, but I can't. All I remember now is we made this stop in

Omaha about the third day and whoever was in my car got out, and in came this girl. That was Betsy. She sat down across from me, just like a fairytale. We were engaged four months later and married in less than a year."

Martin had been telling the story mostly to himself, but then he looked up at Siena and found the most peaceful expression on her face.

"You have a nice voice, Martin."

"Thanks. I did some radio work in the army, sort of professional." He laughed again. He couldn't remember laughing so much in a while. "I should probably get going," he said. "It's late and you're looking tired."

"I've scared you off, haven't I?"

"Not at all. It's just past my bedtime."

"We should do it again sometime," Siena said.

He offered to help clean the glasses but she wouldn't let him. Instead, she walked him to the door and said goodnight. He paced up the stairs, stepped into his apartment and fell almost instantaneously into bed. For the first time in a long time, he experienced a deep and contented sleep.

He saw Siena the next day and the day after that. They went for walks together in the evenings when she came home from work. Martin really liked listening to her, and it felt good to have someone next to him. He told her he wanted to plan a weekend activity for them. He would show her one of his favorite places in the city.

"Four out of five New Yorkers don't know about it," he promised.

On Saturday afternoon, he drove her cross-town in his Buick LeSabre and she was thrilled.

"You're the only person I know in New York with their own car," she told him.

They found a parking space on West End Avenue and walked over to Riverside Park. As they walked under a canopy of trees, they talked and laughed and looked out at the steamers dragging their

way up and down the Hudson and the small gray Jersey cliffs in the middle distance.

Eventually they came upon a towering marble building.

"This is it," he said.

"It's so big," Siena said. "I can't believe the size of it. It looks Roman. What is it doing here?"

"It's Grant's Tomb," he said.

"Who's Grant?"

"Ulysses S. Grant. Former President of the United States. Great Union general of the Civil War..."

"Oh, sure. I know him," Siena said. She looked again at the building, taking it in.

"What do you think?"

"It's humongous. And really pretty."

"It was modeled after Napoleon's Tomb in Paris," Martin told her, pointing out the dome and the portico. "The people wanted to bury Grant like a king. He was an incredible figure in his time, way more popular than Lincoln."

"He's buried in there?"

"Not buried. Entombed."

"Really? Seems like a lot for one guy. I mean, JFK only has that little flame, right?"

"True, but..." Martin tried to think of a way to explain it to her.

"Are we allowed to go inside?" she asked.

"Of course."

Despite the presence of three big red tour buses parked in a driveway off of Riverside Drive, the grounds around the mausoleum were nearly empty. When they stepped through the portico and inside the swinging glass door, they were met with a cool, airless silence. On the entry level there were exhibits that summarized Grant's personal, political and military life, ringed around an open marble circle that opened to the funerary chamber a level below. Martin led Siena through the exhibits and whispered a few extra anecdotes to complement the presentation. Then they descended to the lower level, where Grant and his wife, Julia, were laid to rest in

two great polished wooden caskets. Husband and wife lay together, in equal proportion. Martin walked a circle around them, while Siena stood marveling at their size. Then they went back upstairs.

Outside, they sat on the steps in the shade.

"You've been here a lot, haven't you?" Siena asked.

"My son used to take tennis lessons down the hill and then we'd come up here and grab an ice cream cone from one of the pushcart vendors and sit on these steps. He was always interested in history," he said.

"I like it when you talk about your son. You get this look on your face—I don't even know how to explain it. You can just see how good it makes you feel to talk about him."

Martin nodded. "He's a good kid. You two would get along, I think."

"He sounds a little nerdy to me," she teased.

"That's probably true. You've always run with the cool kids, huh?"

"Me? No... I'm not pretty enough for that."

"I think you're very pretty," Martin said.

Siena laughed. "Thanks, Martin. You're too nice. If you were a little less uptight, you'd really have something going."

"I'm trying," he said. "I really am."

Siena got to her feet and helped him up.

"Come on, let's go before it gets too late. I have to meet Jake. He's taking me out to dinner to try to make up for being such a bum lately. But thanks for showing me all this, it was really cool."

"You're welcome," he said. "Any time."

The following Friday she knocked on his door in the early afternoon. He thought she was going to want to go for a walk, but she had news.

"Ginnie's coming back on Sunday, which means I'm headed back to Brooklyn."

"Really?" Martin couldn't say more than that.

"I was thinking we could have dinner tomorrow night. I'll cook for you."

"I'll be there," he said.

When he arrived the following night he wore a brown sport jacket and had a bottle of wine under his arm. Siena put on music, quiet jazz piano on an old vinyl player. They ate and talked, and then afterwards Siena lay on the couch with her feet in Martin's lap. Every now and then she would comment on the music, or he would start tapping his foot, but mostly they just sat quietly with each other and listened.

"Is this ok?" Siena asked at one point.

"This is great," Martin answered.

The night passed slowly. One bottle of wine was drained, then another. Siena got up to put away some of the crackers and things and she decided to open a third bottle.

"How about switching to white?" she called.

Martin didn't answer. His eyes were closed. He had fallen asleep, his feet planted on the ground. When she came near him, she could hear him breathing in and out.

A little later, Martin snorted and woke up. He was disoriented and then embarrassed. Siena was no longer sitting on the couch and Martin stood up and stretched before he found her. On the windowsill at the far end of the room, she sat staring out the window. She had changed into sweatpants and a plain white t-shirt. Her hair was down. She rested her chin on her knee and her eyes were fixed on the street below, watching the pedestrians and the blinking lights of the cabs passing. Plumes of smoke escaped her mouth and were swept out the window.

"Hey," she said softly.

"I should get going. You see how late this is for me."

"Do you smoke, Martin?"

Martin looked at her fingers.

"This one's about done but I can roll another." She flicked the joint out the window and slid down from the ledge. "It'll be good for you. Help you sleep even better."

She walked over to the counter while he stood by the window. He let her do the rolling.

"I'll get it going," she said, coming back over to him and perching herself again on the shelf below the window.

She lit it, inhaled deeply, and held it. Martin watched her cheeks. She tilted her head upwards and exhaled, letting the smoke roll over the back of her head and down her hair. Then she passed it. He took it and inhaled.

"Hold it as long as you can," she instructed.

Martin tried to imitate just the way Siena did. He exhaled smoothly.

"Take another, this is really mellow stuff."

"I'm not feeling anything," he said.

"You will."

"You know the last time I did this I was in Samoa. A bunch of guys sitting on a beach at night. There was nothing in front of us, just the water and the stars. I never felt so removed from the world."

Siena was watching him carefully. "I think it's fine to be removed, you just have to be comfortable with it." She passed the joint back to him. "You can have the last couple of puffs."

Martin did.

"You know I'm an artist, Martin."

He turned to her. "I thought you worked at a bank?"

"I do. But that's not what I really do, you know?"

"Sure, I get it."

"A lot of times I think there's nothing more removed from the world than trying to create things out of nothing. It can be pretty confining."

"How do you mean? That sounds pretty open to me."

"Well, there's always that opportunity. But the reality is that everything you create is in this vacuum. It's self-contained. And for me at least, it's really hard sometimes to see how my art fits into the world at large, no matter how hard I try to make it fit."

"Can I see something of yours? Do you have anything here?"

"Well..." Siena put her hands over her face.

"I won't say anything bad about it."

"Ok. But I'm putting my trust in you." Siena left the living room and went into the back. She returned holding a long, flat object that looked like a giant teardrop cut out of a piece of cardboard. It was about four feet in diameter and she set it on the table in front of Martin.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a wing."

Martin kept looking at it. "Ok, I thought it was a giant thought bubble or something, but that's the thing about art, it's all subjective."

"You said you were going to be nice," she said, slapping him on the arm.

He started poking at the wing, testing for flexibility. It recoiled when he applied pressure. "Is that plastic?"

"Fiberglass. I don't think I have the shape quite right though. What do you think?"

"What kind of wing is it supposed to be? Different animals have different wings."

"I'm thinking of, like, an eagle."

"Well then, I think it's pretty good."

"Good. I've got the other side too. I want them to be displayed opposite each other, so that there's this big visual span but then a blank space in between. But, here's the best part..." Siena flipped the wing over. There was an elastic strap running across the width of it. "You can slip your arm right in there and then you've got wings. You can fly, Martin."

He didn't know what to say. "That's very nice," he decided. "Have you put them on yet?"

"No, they're too big. I can't do it by myself."

"Ah, a design flaw," he joked.

"They're not just for me."

"How about I help you then? Your last night here, we can put them on. The maiden voyage of the wings."

She smiled. "Look at you," she said.

"Go get the other one. We'll see what we can do."

"I don't think there's enough room in here. I don't want to knock over Ginnie's stuff."

She left the room and Martin started laughing. He cradled the wing in his arm and called to her in the other room: "I just had a thought: we could go up on the roof deck, plenty of room up there to stretch these out."

There were a few patio chairs scattered across the roof, but there was no one else around. Siena walked to the edge of the building and looked out across the street. She had to stand on her tip-toes to see all the way down to the street.

"I didn't even know we could come up here," she said.

The sky was clear and the moon was nearly full, lighting up enough stars to make their ceiling seem warm and infinite. Martin used to stargaze with Betsy on the Cape in the summer. They rented a cottage on the water with a dock and a green, rusted rowboat for two. They would wade out into the Bay in the rowboat with blankets and a thermos of spiked hot chocolate. Sometimes they would talk out there and sometimes they would say nothing at all. It was those spaces in between moments, the ones that became moments themselves that Martin mourned the most.

"You try them on first," Siena said.

Martin handed over the wing and extended his left arm. Siena slipped the first wing over his arm, the elastic strap holding it in place. The weight of it forced him to drop his arm down to his side. He waited while she struggled to get a grip on the second wing. Holding out his arm, he noticed that his watch had stopped. He wondered how this had happened to him, and whether it ever would again. Then Siena was sliding the second wing over his arm and there he was, standing on a rooftop in a pair of wings.

Siena stepped back and Martin walked to the edge. He could see out over the rest of the city. He closed his eyes.

"You're flying, Martin," Siena whispered. "How does it feel?"

In that moment, he stepped outside his body. He was able to look upon himself.

"It's something else," he said.

