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Losing Power but Finding a Way to Connect

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Erin Patrice O'Brien for The New York Times

FROM YONKERS TO THE MARK Brad and Sonia Tito brought their son, Parker, and Bella the beagle for drinks and gawking at this Upper East Side hotel, which so many downtown denizens poured into. They stayed with Mr. Tito's mother nearby during the storm.

When a natural disaster hits, worlds collide. The ways in which Hurricane Sandy upended home life last week ranged from the truly tragic to the curious and unsettling, as neighborhoods literally and metaphorically washed into one another.

New Yorkers, parochially devoted to their neighborhoods and suspicious of others, found themselves in new and exotic parts of the city they previously might have disdained. They marveled at the customs and culture of their new, temporary locales, grateful for the ports they had found in the storm and amazed that so many disparate towns could exist on the same island.

They solved problems with New York ingenuity. (After discovering that her water-filled tub had drained, Susan Hunter, a Greenwich Village graphic designer, used a bottle of white Zinfandel to flush the toilet instead.) Frequent moves were also common. (Hanne Larsen, a single mother of four in TriBeCa who runs the Downtown Dance Factory school, invited a couple with three young children who lived in the evacuation zone in Battery Park City to stay with her, only to move her family into their apartment when hers lost power.)

Family members collided; former spouses took each other in and gritted their teeth. And some New Yorkers learned that a game of bridge could be as sweetly connective as Facebook — or better, because it came with a piece of rugelach.

DOES THAT SHELTER HAVE ROBES AND WI-FI?

You might think that if you found yourself without water, electricity or heat, you would be grateful for any warm, well-lighted place, but that was not always the case — especially for Manhattanites with lovely apartments and a wide circle of generous uptown friends.

“You know that moment in your life when you have to decide who you’re going to give the kids to if you die? It was like that,” said Sybil Adelman, a humorist and mosaic artist. She and her husband, Martin Sage, a comedy writer, had to abandon their large Greenwich Village apartment the day after they lost power. “All your nearest and dearest friends who say, ‘Come and stay with us,’ you start sizing them up in ways you never thought about before: ‘They’re workaholics. They won’t have time for me. I’ll be in the way,’ ” she said. “Then, when I got over all the picking and choosing, I started being kind of resentful of all the people who didn’t invite me: ‘Why didn’t they invite me? I had them to dinner two years ago.’ ”

The couple’s savior from the storm? Mr. Sage’s sister Annie Passer, who has a rambling three-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side, an extremely generous woman who, according to Ms. Adelman, was offering showers and meals to everyone who asked.

“It’s like FEMA for Jews,” Ms. Adelman said last week, after she and her husband had happily moved in. “She’s got whitefish salad, she’s got wine in all colors, she’s got what to read, she’s got clothes, she’s got all kinds of shampoos. And she’s the most relaxed about it. Looking around, I see two ironing boards and four flat-screen TVs. It’s like a hotel.”

AND NO CHILDREN, IF YOU PLEASE

Anya Schiffrin, who teaches at Columbia University, is married to the Nobel-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, and she writes the cheeky Davos Wives blog. She has a three-bedroom, three-bathroom uptown apartment, and so had a stream of guests (or, as she put it, “competing factions”) during the hurricane. Considering Ms. Schiffrin’s excellence as a hostess (“I like my guests to feel happy: I buy organic berries, I put Ambien on the pillow”), one can see why.

“I got friends’ children from the West Village, then in-laws from California who were stranded in Newark,” she said. “I asked my mom if she would take the overflow. She has three bedrooms on 94th. She said no way, she hates houseguests. So I pawned off some of my overflow to cousins on 75th Street. Meanwhile, the childless couple that got here first said they didn’t want any young kids to stay, so they beat out my friend with the toddler who is in the East Village.”

Wait a minute: the guest gets to set terms?

“We operate on a strictly first-come first-serve basis,” Ms. Schiffrin said.

As of last Thursday, the household included a couple from the West Village and two out-of-town cousins in their late 20s.

“You know how New Yorkers are always so busy?” Ms. Schiffrin said. “The upside of this is a lot of togetherness. Yesterday we all put on our pajamas and watched ‘The Letter.’ The younger

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/08/garden/after-hurricane-sandy-losing-power-but-finding-a-way-to-connect.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0

generation had never seen a Bette Davis movie. And we ate the Halloween candy the kids didn't get."

Throughout all of this, there is one thing that has been cracking her up, Ms. Schiffrin said.

"I am getting phone calls and e-mails from all these terrible places where you'd think we'd be worried about them: from Calcutta, Cairo, Jakarta, Uganda," she said. "It was like: 'How are you doing? It looks terrible.' "

YOUR HURRICANE SOMMELIER SUGGESTS

No doubt the oenophiles among you are wondering why Ms. Hunter, the graphic designer who used white Zinfandel to flush her toilet, chose that particular wine.

"Hate white Zin," said Ms. Hunter, whose husband, Jeffrey, a lawyer, supported her choice. "It was the first to go and was an easy decision. But we had other things in the liquor cabinet that we were considering, some crème de menthe, some hazelnut liqueur. Never would have let the cabernet go down."

LOVE THE HAIR!

Downtown, in Peter Cooper Village in the East 20s, no one bats an eye when Derrick, a mutt of unknown age and origin with a pink mohawk, goes walking with Karen Moline, a writer. Downtown, with its philosophy of live and let live, champions individuality above all.

Ms. Moline, a longtime Villager, did not want to leave her 10th-floor apartment there when the hurricane was coming, even though it abutted the evacuation zone. She might have stuck it out even after water washed through the complex on Monday night, taking out the power and the heat. But her 11-year-old son, Emmanuel, was deeply rattled by the sight of 23rd Street under water, cars unmoored and floating in the storm surge. Also, carrying Derrick up and down 10 flights of stairs four times a day got old fast.

Ms. Moline's safe (though decidedly cramped) haven was two rooms at the Doubletree Hilton in Times Square with her sister, Jacqueline, her brother-in-law and their twin 7-year-olds, whose Chelsea apartment was also powerless, and her parents, whose high-rise in the East 30s, the ominously named Rivergate, was completely flooded.

The difficulty for Ms. Moline wasn't living with eight people in two small, very expensive rooms. It was the discordance, she said, of being a native New Yorker in "tourist-town."

"I don't want to sound churlish," said Ms. Moline, grateful for the kindness of her family, who footed the bill for four nights. "We are very lucky. But it was so weird to be among all these happy tourists in a place where quite literally they never turn the lights off."

Emmanuel, still shaken by what happened downtown, made himself a tent out of a blanket and slept under a table for four nights. "He said it made him feel safer," Ms. Moline said.

The one member of her family who truly thrived was Derrick, the pink-furred dog. He was happier in the bright, noisy ecosystem, coying up to tourists who were eager to have their photograph taken with him and delighted to meet a real New Yorker.

**AND LO, WHEN GOTHAM IS FLOODED,
DETAIL MEN SHALL MIX WITH HIPSTERS
AND THE UPPER EAST SIDE SHALL BE COOL**



Uptown, at the **Mark** hotel on East 77th Street, dogs and children were favored guests, even those who were refugees from the suburbs. Brad and Sonia Tito were staying with his mother on the Upper East Side, waiting to move into a new house in Yonkers, where Mr. Tito is the city's director of sustainability. The hurricane caused a mortgage hiccup for the family, he said, as the bank wanted to be sure the house was still standing before closing. So their stay with his mother was a lot longer than he had anticipated.

"You try and keep out of the way, use the coasters, be neat," said Mr. Tito, 35, adding that he had not lived with his mother since he left for college. "She was very gracious, but I felt guilty."

On Friday, he, his wife and their 15-month-old son, Parker, and beagle, Bella, found the lobby at the Mark a nice respite from the closeness of the apartment. As it happens, they weren't alone in seeking solace there. "We saw Anna Wintour, Kelly Ripa, all these people wearing black, people with spiked hair," Mr. Tito said. "You could tell that something unique was happening, like the Upper East Side was the new downtown."

Actual downtowners didn't always agree, but they seemed taken aback by how, well, nice it was up there. David Kuhn, a literary agent, and Kevin Thompson, a film production designer, live on West Ninth Street and spent the week at a friend's Park Avenue apartment. Mr. Kuhn noted the contrast between a neighborhood that was designed, as he said, "for residential bourgeois living, and many downtown neighborhoods, which are actually fake neighborhoods." One friend who lives near his hosts uptown told him, "You know, it's kind of boring, but it's also really relaxing."

IKE AN OLD SAD SONG

The angst of the dispossessed and the fear of being a nuisance were common threads among those displaced by the hurricane.

Jonathan Schwartz, the WNYC host, was “de-craned,” as he put it, when the crane that was being used in the construction of a luxury building on his block of West 57th Street snapped during high winds, causing the mandatory evacuation of Mr. Schwartz’s building.

On Monday, he moved into his daughter’s Greenwich Village one-bedroom, and his wife, the actress Zohra Lampert, stayed with a friend in her tiny studio. When the Village lost power, Mr. Schwartz and his daughter moved into the town house where her mother, Mr. Schwartz’s ex-wife, the writer Marie Brenner, lives.

“Marie and I are very close friends, and Marie is married to a guy named Ernie Pomerantz,” said Mr. Schwartz, who speaks in a slow, sonorous voice, and tends to melancholy digression and dramatic pauses. “We had a very warm-spirited dinner, and afterwards I went up to the fourth floor, which meant I had moved Ernie out of where he works and dislocated everyone, but everyone was comfortable. I came down the next morning and everything was all right.”

Mr. Schwartz then left and went about his business for the day.

The following morning, however, he realized something had changed. “There was a tension in the air,” he said. “And I’m sure this applies to many people.”

Mr. Schwartz said he did the inner monologue of the eager-to-please guest: “ ‘I’ll wash the dishes, I’ll take out the garbage, I’ll paint the wall.’ And yet, when you come down the second morning, you realize this is over. Even if you are a relative, after a couple of days you become an inconvenience, and you cannot help but see it in your hostess’s eyes.”

Mr. Schwartz paused. “It’s hidden away in the iris.” Another pause. “There is a certain flag that one sees in the iris, and that flag has a word on it.” Pause. “And the word is ‘Go.’ It’s not that anyone is ungenerous, it’s just that the mechanism of the house has been disturbed, the needle on the disc of their existence is stuck and is causing a miniature havoc.”

WHEN A HURRICANE SLAMS NEW YORK, SOFAS SUFFER MOST

Jody Britt is the creative director of Rock Paper Photo, an online photo gallery. Last month, she had just finished decorating her studio apartment on West 75th Street in shades of white and gray. There is a white leather sofa, a soft gray rug and shiny, perfect white walls and bookshelves.

When the storm hit, Ms. Britt used Facebook to invite any displaced New Yorkers to come bunk with her. Her best friend, Jenny Dutko, a sports and entertainment marketer, appeared first. A day later, Brad Taylor and his wife, Leslie Kellner-Taylor, founders of a marketing company, arrived. The Taylors spent the days in Ms. Britt’s apartment and her Midtown office, and the nights at their own home downtown. Ms. Dutko slept on the precious sofa.

Ms. Britt said that she was thrilled to have them all, but that she would be lying if she said she wasn't worried about her place.

"When they all arrived, I said something like, 'I'm so excited you're here, but could you take your shoes off?' " she said. "And Brad is over 6 feet tall and the sofa is tipping over and I'm telling him he's got to sit in the middle. I'm a single woman. I'm not used to having a man in the apartment. And then they're eating, and there's crumbs."

By the end of the week, however, bonding had ensued — so much so that the storm orphans and their host met for a celebratory dinner at Ocean Grill on Columbus Avenue on Friday night.

And the sofa, the paint job and the rug are doing just fine. "My mother told me to Scotchgard," Ms. Britt said.

MAYBE THEY WERE THE GREATEST GENERATION

When the storm hit, Deb Stein and her husband, James Knudsen, who live in Long Island City, N.Y., brought her mother, Ruth Stein, and her uncle and aunt, Curt and Gloria Sloan, from their homes in Bethpage, N.Y., to stay with them in their apartment.

Ms. Stein's mother and uncle were refugees from Germany during World War II who were sent to safety in America by their parents. The median age of the guests was 87. And they certainly changed the habits of Ms. Stein, a jewelry designer, and her husband, a lighting designer.

"The old folks are warm and comfortable and making me cook questionable foods they removed from their defrosted refrigerators — most of which I threw out behind their backs," Ms. Stein wrote in an e-mail early in the week.

A few days passed, and she sent another e-mail. "Great Depression conversation at noon, bridge tournament at 3, dinner at 4:45, bullet to our heads at dawn," she wrote jokingly. "Now they're too warm."

In fact, she told a reporter later, having her family together like this turned out to be a special experience. Sure, there was but one bathroom for five people, and space was tight: her aunt and uncle were in the bedroom; her mother was on the couch; she and her husband slept on an inflatable bed in the study. But she had gotten to know her relatives in ways she had never done before.

"I think the biggest change was, we sit around telling stories every night," Ms. Stein said. "My aunt said, 'If you learn to play bridge when you're young, you'll never be lonely when you're old.' These people lived through the better parts of the 20th century, they have stories we never heard before and we've had time to be with them, and it's been lovely. My aunt was an Army nurse, my mother told me about coming to this country when she was 12 and she had to sleep on a cot, not knowing whether her parents were ever going to come and get her."

She added: "My uncle told me yesterday he was a translator during W.W. II. It had been cold, he said: 'Let me tell you something, Kid, after the Battle of the Bulge, this is nothing.' "