Sleeping on the roof

Ninety-nine degrees, a hydrant going full blast, and the night I gave up on my apartment.

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5 MIN READ

It's been so hot. Like, it's been hot before, but this week it was the kind of hot where the city just gives up. Ninety-nine on Wednesday. Ninety-seven on Thursday. The weather app kept sending me alerts with a little red thermometer on them, like I didn't know. I knew. I was in it.

I don't have central air. Nobody in my building does. The loft is great for a lot of things, but it's an old factory with huge windows facing west, so by four in the afternoon the sun comes straight in and the whole place turns into a toaster. I have one window AC unit in the bedroom area that sounds like a plane taking off, and it cools about six feet around it. Everything else is just a box fan moving hot air around in a circle.

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On Wednesday I gave up on working at home and went to the coffee place on Bedford just for the AC. So did everyone else. Every seat was taken. People were sitting on the floor by the window with laptops. I got an iced coffee and drank it in about four minutes and then just held the cup against my neck until it was warm.

I walked home slowly, sticking to the shade, which on my block is about three feet wide. The sidewalk smelled like hot garbage, which is a very specific New York summer smell.

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Then I turned the corner and the hydrant was open.

Somebody on the block has one of those sprinkler caps, the kind the fire department gives out, and the kids had it going full blast. A big fan of water spraying across the whole street, sparkling in the sun. There were maybe fifteen kids running through it, screaming. A couple of little ones in diapers just sitting in the gutter where the water ran, completely happy. A teenager on a bike riding back and forth through it over and over. The parents were sitting on the stoops in lawn chairs with their feet in the stream.

A car came down the street and slowed down, and all the kids lined up on both sides like they were waiting for it, and the driver rolled his windows down and drove through on purpose. They cheered. He honked. It was the best thing I've ever seen a car do.

I stood on the corner for a second just watching. Then this little boy, maybe eight, with goggles on his head, looked at me and said "you coming in or what?" So I took off my sneakers, put my phone on the stoop, and walked into the spray in my shorts and t-shirt.

It was freezing. It was the best I'd felt all week. The kids thought it was hilarious that a grown man was standing in the hydrant. They kept pushing each other into me.

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Linda was on her stoop in a big sun hat watching the whole thing. When I came out dripping, she handed me a frozen washcloth from a little cooler next to her chair. Just like that. Like she had them ready. She said "put it on the back of your neck, it's the trick." It was the trick. I asked how many she had in there. She said "enough for the block."

She said she's been through, like, thirty of these summers in the building and the trick is not to fight it. Stay low, stay wet, don't cook. I asked her what she eats when it's this hot. She said "watermelon and gossip." I don't think she was joking.

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The problem was the nights. The heat doesn't go away when the sun goes down. It just sits in the apartment. Wednesday night I lay on my bed in front of the box fan at 2am, sweating through the sheets, and the AC was doing its jet engine thing and not helping. I couldn't write. My laptop was hot. The kitchen table was hot. Even the lamp was too hot to turn on.

So around three I took my yoga mat, a sheet, and a pillow and went up to the roof.

You can get to my roof through a hatch at the top of the stairs. Technically I don't think we're supposed to. But everyone does it. There's a couple of old beach chairs up there and a plastic table with an ashtray that nobody claims.

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It was like ten degrees cooler up there. There was a breeze. Not much, but enough. I laid the mat out on the tar paper, which was still a little warm from the day, and lay down on my back.

The sky was that orange-purple city color it gets at night, no real stars. But I could see everything. The Williamsburg Bridge all lit up with the J train going across it, little bright windows sliding over the water. The Manhattan skyline across the river, all the buildings with

their lights still on. The water tower on the building across the street. A helicopter going slowly down the river. Somebody else up on their roof too, two buildings over, a little dot of a phone screen in the dark. I waved. They didn't see me.

I lay there for a long time with the sheet over my legs and my arm under my head. It was so quiet compared to my apartment. And for once my head was quiet too. I think it was just too hot to think.

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I woke up at 5:40 to pigeons. Like, a pigeon on the edge of the roof, about three feet from my face, staring at me. The sun was coming up behind me over Queens, and the whole skyline in front of me was lit up pink and gold. I'd actually slept. Like three hours, straight through. Which for me is basically a miracle. On a roof. On a yoga mat. Next to a pigeon.

I did it again Thursday and Friday. By Friday the band girls from the building next door had heard about it and brought their own blankets up to their roof, so there were three of us on two roofs, waving across at each other at 2am like idiots.

The heat broke on Sunday. A huge thunderstorm came through in the afternoon and the temperature dropped twenty degrees in an hour. Everybody on the block came out on their stoops to watch it rain, like it was a parade. The kids ran out into it. Nobody turned on the hydrant. They didn't need to.

I slept in my bed that night. It was fine. I kind of missed the pigeon.

– Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.