

Liz Glines

Jersey City: a shocking tale

My name is Liz Glines, and I live in Jersey City, New Jersey. It seems like I should be going to 6 PM meetings on a Saturday with pizza and salad to say this. I know where I live, but it's taken me 2 years to admit to myself that I live in Jersey City and that there's a chance that I won't leave.

I first moved on instinct. I got a job and I was in a rush to find somewhere to live so I went for the cheap seedy place in Jersey to put off learning how to budget. I keep telling myself that I'll move to the city (Manhattan) within a year or two, but as time goes on, that timeline becomes less clear. I now live in an apartment building with an electric key and a buzzer, but this past mid-August, I realized that no kind of security will protect me from the drama of Journal Square as I looked out my window one late night.

8/17/2007 12:30AM

I look out my window onto another apartment building. I see into windows with the same drab colors as the next, and I see people living their routine. I think that I'm nothing like them, but then I remind myself that I'm living in Jersey City too. My gaze wonders and stops on a leafy backyard, lit by a porch light honing on a bright red towel hanging up to dry. The light brings forth the colors of the leaves around it and it's beautiful. I just found something beautiful in Jersey City. Who knew that in Jersey City, there was such a vibrant red towel and a porch surrounded by trees. And all this time, every form of beauty I saw, I brought over from Manhattan. Every bright color in my home was picked up on the way home from work. Who are these people that make Jersey City so beautiful as if they want to make it their permanent home? I have a red towel too, but I bought it in New York. In any case, my view is beautiful and I accept it.

I hear whispers, cars, street shouts, and a light flickers in another apartment; I can sense it. Last week, I chose to open my window instead of listening to the crotchety old air conditioner, and tonight I am learning to appreciate Jersey City. It's funny to think that at one point, I bought

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curtains and blinds to shut out and hide from the outdoors. Now, I can't go to sleep without the drone of cars passing by and the promise that a street lamp will never go out, so that I can lay here looking out my window spellbound by the ghettos of Jersey City.

Those wild plants you see along the highway have grown tall in this backyard, but make the yard look exotic rather than unkempt.

Okay, now I see the sketchy questionable things that make me realize that I should shut my window and turn on the air that isn't shared with the strangers outside. A cab just pulled over in the abandoned parking lot bordering the backyard. The passenger wouldn't get out, so the driver got out and dragged the passenger out of the car. The passenger scurried into the night, after hopping the fence into the backyard, but being careful not to run into the light that makes Jersey beautiful. Just then, I noticed someone hiding in the corner of the rooftop across from my building. My eyes followed her around the building. She was swaying back and forth and smoking while wandering the rooftop around the satellite dishes looking for a place to do something sketchy. As soon as she found her spot, she crouched down and at that point, I refused to look. My first thought was drugs. At this point, I thought, I'm nothing like her, but we live right next to each other, we have to have something in common. She retreated to the lit door down the stairs leading to perhaps her apartment. That's night in Journal Square.

8/22/2007

At first, I think, why does that crappy apartment get a rooftop. Us transitional souls, too good for Jersey City, dwellers deserve a rooftop just as much as they do. But then I look at this rundown apartment and I decide that if anyone needs to escape the pressures of Jersey poverty, it's the people that live across the street from me. Older, impotent, warranted souls, who get on by social security, who heat their homes by opening the oven and decide not to pay rent until the collectors say so, live at that apartment. No wonder why this girl escapes to the roof every night. She does the same thing – just wanders around different lookout points, and just ... looks out. And when she squatted down, I braved the potential sight of a needle and looked. She had hid from the wind to light a cigarette.

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I paused for a moment. She was inside, and someone new was on the roof. There were a few of them. Chillin'. When I view people in their Jersey City element, I feel like I am like them. On the weekends, I dress in my scrubs and rugged hair, no makeup, but I don't know why. I think, although I am polite and respectful, I dress down, perhaps its because I don't respect my neighbors enough to dress nicely. As I realized this, I ducked further down into my sheets and eventually fell asleep.

8/24/2007 11:59PM

The red towel found its way outside on the neighbor's porch again and finally makes my view so beautiful again. We're supposed to see Mars next to the moon at 12:30, so I'm gonna attempt to stay up for that, and maybe catch someone sneaking onto the roof in the process. That damn red towel is really what's keeping me up at night. It's the most vibrant red, I have ever seen.

There's a scene in my favorite movie, *Kolya*, where a Czech man and a Russian boy come across a language barrier. The boy is talking about his country's flag and he says, "Ours is red." "*Krasni*," meaning red in Russian and beautiful in Czech. The man says, "What's so beautiful about that? It's red...like your underpants. Now ours, ours is beautiful." The boy, knowing that his flag was red, stood his ground and continued to say "Ours is red."

I can honestly call this towel "*Krasni*," because it's both. Ugh, is it 12:30 yet?

9/6/2007 10PM

The girl makes her way to the roof again. She finds a secret corner and crouches down. She continues to wander around the top of the building and crouch down. I am spellbound. What could she be doing? Am I so naive in my suburbanity that I am ignorant of common city excursions to the roof, or is this actual suspicious activity that warrants notification of the stubborn cops who check my purse only when I'm late for work and don't even look in the right pockets?

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9/7/07 4AM (recorded at 7AM)

A fight broke out later, a verbal fight with shoulder pushes and threats. I recognize the voice of the woman on the roof. Everyday, when I lived in the real ghetto, she used to ask me for money in front of the Hispanic grocery store that sold looseys. I heard her in other places too. I heard her on the streets of New York, on the streets in West Philly, Northeast Philly, and often on the show, Intervention, but every time, she had a different face. This is the sound of a drug addict. This woman was incredibly protective of someone/something or herself. She was screaming, "Get the fuck away from me!" in her rash raspy voice. She screamed to scare the man on the other end of the conversation, but yet didn't seem threatened. It was the conversation content that had me concerned. This man had a tall boxy stature, but I didn't see his face. They had a small audience of two or three sitting in a corner of the roof and watching. These two were the only ones standing and they followed each other around the edge of the roof, and my eyes followed them. The man kept saying, "Why don't you just jump off?" His words weren't threatening but he moved into her space to eventually corner her and then backed away when she screamed again. He said that she probably would jump off, because she was so fucked up. He wasn't screaming but he had a deep voice that projected, and I couldn't help hearing him. It was like listening for the thunder after a frightening flash. For the first time in my life, my phone was set to 911, and my finger was on the send button. The man finally left and made it a point to slam the door behind him. The yelling didn't continue and I stopped caring what the others were going to do. I turned around and looked at my safe bedroom with wide eyes and complete shock. Somehow, I fell asleep. I'm closing my blinds tonight.

Looking back

I'm somewhat thankful for the cold weather that keeps people indoors, but next summer, if I'm not in Manhattan yet, I may just be compelled to look out my window again.