

A little story about New York

"True Tales of American Life" gathers 180 stories selected and edited by Paul Auster, the famous American novelist. They are all true stories. Here is one told by Dana T. Payne, a woman who lived in New York in the 1970s.

In 1979 I was living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan – at 47 West Eighty-fifth Street, between Columbus and Central Park West. It was a transitional neighborhood in those days. The west side of Columbus Avenue was still lower-class, but across the street it was rapidly becoming chic. Poor people lived shoulder to shoulder with young professionals in an uneasy sort of peace.

I managed on my meager income because I had lived in the same place since 1976, and it was a rent-controlled apartment. [...] I loved being in New York in the summertime. It was hot but quiet and empty. During the week I would walk the mile or so downtown to my job at the theatrical actors' union, enjoying the shady, deserted streets and the different neighborhoods that I passed through – from Central Park West and its grand old apartment buildings to the patchwork of Broadway with its Cuban-Chinese takeout joints and Jewish delis¹. At night, I would sometimes drag my mattress up to the roof and lie on my back, listening to the noises and cooling off in the breeze. Or my cat and I would go downstairs in our bare feet and sit on the stoop², where I'd drink a couple of Budweisers with the other tenants, listening to the sounds of Eighty-fifth Street. It was a quiet, slow-moving neighborhood in those days. Elderly women planted folding chairs in the entrances of their buildings and sat fanning³ themselves. Everyone opened their windows wide for air-circulation, so we could hear babies crying and couples arguing and televisions blaring. Elliot from the second floor would practise jazz numbers for his club gigs, sometimes until after midnight.

On one hot Thursday evening during rent week⁴, I came home early with my pocketful of cash and two large paper sacks of groceries in my arms. All I wanted to do was get home, drop the heavy bags, and turn on my floor fan. No one was out on the stoop to help me, so I opened the outer door with my foot and sidled in next to the mailboxes. I was dimly aware that someone had come into the building behind me, but I was distracted as I shifted the bags around in my arms so I could reach my key and turn the lock of the inner door.

I was walking through the foyer⁵ when I heard a voice say to me, "Give me all your money."

The meaning of the words hardly registered. I turned around and was starting to say something when I saw him: a tall, heavysset man holding a long knife.

I stared at him.

He said, "Give me your money."

I heard my own voice answering, "Are you crazy? I just went to the store. I don't have any money." It didn't make any sense, I couldn't believe that I had said it. I'm sure he couldn't either.

"Give me all your money – or I'll cut you," he said.

I thought, how can I pay the rent if I give him all my money? I can't give him my money. I need it.

"No," I said. "Go away."

He looked confused. After all, I was a helpless female, and he was a big tough-looking guy with a knife.

