

THE HUNT

Bravely Crossing Fifth Avenue



Living the high life on West 56th Street; a stretch of West 55th Street yielded no good options; a promising high-rise on East 64th Street; Kelly Carter at home with Lucy, her long-haired Chihuahua.

Photographs by John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times; right by Marko Georgiev for The New York Times

By Joyce Cohen

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LIVING in a nice place was important to Kelly E. Carter, and she was willing to pay the price — until she faced a rent increase on her alcove studio in a luxury tower. Living so sumptuously wasn't *that* important after all.

Ms. Carter, 44, a native of Los Angeles, started her career as a sportswriter. “I never wanted to be an old lady chasing young men around,” she said, so she turned to travel and entertainment writing. She rented out her three-bedroom Los Angeles town house, freelanced from Italy for two years and then, fed up with the weak dollar, decided to return to the United States last year. She rented a studio in the Westport, a high-rise building at 10th Avenue and 56th Street, for \$2,541 a month.

“I spend so much time at home as a freelance writer, it's important for me to have nice surroundings,” she said. Some days, she emerges only to walk Lucy, her long-haired Chihuahua. “I splurged.”

Instead of dwelling on her high rent, she thought about the amenities it bought: a business center, fitness center, doorman, concierge and roof terrace. She availed herself of nearly everything.

Enticingly, the management company, Related Rentals, allowed the rent to be paid with an American Express card. That increased the number of points American Express would transfer to her frequent-flier accounts. Ms. Kelly, who is 6-foot-1, used those points to upgrade to business class or first-class airplane seats.

The downside was the neighborhood. Groups of people hung out, smoking, near the drug-treatment center on the corner. She crossed the street or carried Lucy so the dog would not step in trash and broken glass.

When her one-year lease expired, the landlord raised the rent. “When it was \$2,541, I would tell myself it was \$2,500,” she said, to make herself feel better. But she rounded up the new figure, \$2,650, to \$2,700, “That was too much,” she said, and decided it was time to move rather than renew the lease. (After she moved, the studio was listed for \$2,972, though the price later dropped to \$2,795.)

Ms. Carter began hunting for a studio renting for less than \$2,000 a month. She hoped to remain in the neighborhood, so it would be easy to visit with a good friend who lives on West 51st Street.

Ms. Carter set her sights on her favorite block of West 55th Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. But one spacious studio there was \$2,200, and one for \$1,700 was too small.

She found the same story on the Upper West Side, where no apartments in her price range were suitable. The main room in one \$1,800-a-month place was 11 feet by 13 feet. So she looked east.

Friends warned her against the Upper East Side, calling it a homogenous place filled with post-collegiate bars and little else. But she shopped and dined there often, and liked the clean streets. “As much as people tried to scare me away, I fit in there,” she said.

At only \$1,825 a month, a studio in the East 70s sounded great. Though she expected the worst, it was everything the ad claimed — a large studio with an alcove, just right for a desk — in an Art Deco building with a pristine lobby.

She even knew people in the building. When she mentioned that she was a freelance writer for People magazine, the broker, Jonathan Gruber of JMG Properties, told her that the tenants included a writer for People, Natasha Stoyloff, and her husband, Steve Erwin.

She called them to ask about bugs, secondhand smoke and noise.

There were no bugs. A trying-to-quit smoker lived in the apartment below. “You can hear things in the hall, but I don’t find it bothersome,” Mr. Erwin said. His apartment gets some street noise, but the apartment Ms. Carter was looking at faced the back, making for “a whole different living reality,” he said.

Ms. Carter was encouraged. “The first place I saw on the Upper East Side was actually acceptable,” she said. “I said, if it is this easy on the East Side, what else is out there?”

Nothing else. One place had a refrigerator in the living room. Another had roach bait in the cabinets. One agent took her to a high-rise on East 64th Street — too expensive at \$2,250.

So she paid the broker's fee of 15 percent of a year's rent and signed a one-year lease for the last thing she expected — an unposh, unswank, amenity-free building. She moved in last month.

She finds herself at home on the East Side, enthralled with the restaurants and markets. "When I saw the escargot selection in Agata & Valentina, I thought, oh my gosh, already seasoned — you pop it in the oven for 11 minutes and it's done!"

She is slowly getting used to life without a doorman. When some computer equipment was delivered — on her birthday, no less — she had to wait at home all afternoon. "I missed my doorman immediately," she said.

But it's also nice not to have doormen who know all about her social life, or lack of it, she said. "At the Westport, they probably said, 'She is so beautiful and she has such a pathetic life.' Here, nobody knows that."

Noise, however, is a minor irritant. She hears her upstairs neighbor arising to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, the thud of newspapers on doorsteps in the morning, the screams of three small brothers in the hall and the shushes of their parents.

"I should have asked about kids, not smoking," she said. She tries to adjust her sleep schedule around the noise.

"I told her to buy earplugs and suck it up," said her 51st Street friend, Stacie Henderson, the marketing director for the Versace fashion house.

The two work long hours, so they often get together late at night. "It used to be: I will meet you in five minutes," Ms. Henderson said. "Now it takes us half an hour to find a place" and for one of them to get across town. "Another friendship divided by Fifth Avenue!"

Still, Ms. Henderson is shocked at how content Ms. Carter is in her new home. "She is a very particular person and it is interesting to see how New York prices affect one's taste," she said.

"Only six months ago she was, like, 'I've got to have a gym, and I must have a doorman.' Then it went down to, 'Maybe I don't need a gym, but I have to have a doorman.' Then it was, 'I guess I don't get that many packages.' "

Ms Henderson was taken aback at the transformation, because, she said, "Kelly is so high-maintenance."