CHAPTER 10: ALISTAIR ON THE 9TH FLOOR.

It's impossible to deliver a fair reckoning of the hotel, and catch the true flavour of life there, without including the odd-balls, the wonderfully weird, and the bat shit crazy, so much part of the Chelsea bubble universe. They ranged from the famous to folks known only to us residents, from turbulent divas to the Gotham equivalent of village idiots, all uniquely at home in the hotel.

Stanley, in his inimitable style, often took pity on wayward souls not playing with a full hand, and offered them shelter within the hotel (assuming they could pay the rent). He extended this to include a wide range of society's outcasts. Case in point.....before I moved up to the roof, when I lived on the fourth floor, I returned home one day to find my apartment robbed, several nice items, including my lovely mini-television, gone.

I went out on to the balcony, which is shared by all the apartments on that floor, to collect my thoughts and curse a little. The room next to mine had it's french windows open, I could see right in without trying, and there, all laid up like a hot lunch, were two big old Hell's Angels, passed out and surrounded by my missing goods.

I rushed down to the desk, and breathlessly informed Stanley, who dealt with it. The point here is not, wow, I got robbed, it's that a hotelier, in New York City, would rent a room to Hell's Angels, fully tricked out in their gang colors. I didn't like getting ripped off, but secretly admired Stanley's beyond-liberal entry standards. In some kind of balance, I'v seen him turn away straight Texan tourists who he deemed unsuitable. I'v also seen him hondle a room to out-of-towners, telling them Bob Dylan was born in it. (A bit not true: Duluth, Minnesota, 1941).

For my ten cents, the craziest of the permanent tenants was Viva, Warhol's ageing starlet, one of the last remnants of his tenancy there. We used to babysit one of her girls, future actress Gabby Hoffman, so, unlike most residents we were on reasonably friendly terms with her. I was awoken one night at 3AM, my alarm system shrieking, to find her erecting a washing line in my garden. She informed me that she had read that it was her right to hang laundry on the roof of the NY building you lived in, and that she was going to exercise that right, right now. The fact that my section of the roof was private (there was a public section at the back of the roof), that alarms were blaring, that hotel staff and the cops were piling onto the roof to see what's up, none of this phased her....she had a right, that was it.

It ended with her being manhandled of the roof by the desk guys, who obviously were adept at dealing with her. I saw her in the lobby, a couple of days later, said hello, and was about to ask her about it when I looked into her eyes....nah, don't bother, nobody home.

Hiroya, a Japanese artist who painted huge, long canvases, often featuring the name 'Marcia Resnik', a photographer kinda well known in the 70's. He, and everyone else, had no idea why she featured in all his art, which festooned the stairwell for years. Hiroya died at the Duane Reed pharmacy on 8th Ave, also under mysterious, hard to figure out circumstances.

Angel, another Japanese fellow, wore angel wings 24/7, not magnificent eagle jobbies, but those small tatty ones from Halloween stores, eight bucks a pair. He had them in several colors. I asked him many times, why the wings?, but he would only laugh, and be Japanese shy.

There were forever incidents with nutters trying to get on the roof. My section, the original garden, occupied the 90% of the front roof, facing North, on 23rd Street. The rear of the roof was open to those who knew of it, but was separated from my territory by hedges, fences, and an ornately decorated steel gate, right next to where the Landmark Status Chelsea staircase bubbled on to the roof. This was locked and alarmed most of the time, with good reason.

Several times, poor souls tried to gain entry, with a view to jumping of off it, with two eventually succeeding. It would have been much easier to do it from the rear roof, but I guess it was not so dramatic, landing in the scrubby backyards of 22nd Street, rather than that stretch of pavement in front of the hotel. I was, of course, appalled and sympathetic, but also pissed off, as the subsequent grillings by New York's Finest are low on my list of fun pastimes.

It caused endless trouble, police, press, safety geezers, an upset Stanley, was beyond distressing for anyone staying with me, and one of my inner voices reminds me how much I despise

people who jump in front of subway trains at rush hour, guaranteeing that their personal drama and decision will cause maximum durm and strang to those pressing on with their everyday existence. So my gates stayed mostly locked, with entry offered for only those planning on leaving by the same method.

But the all time Prix de Crazy belongs, as far as I'm concerned, to a character called Alistair, or Alistair on the Ninth Floor, as he was know to us inmates. He must have had a trust fund or some other steady source of income, 'cause he sure as hell was too out-there for regular employment, and while Stanley was unique in his willingness to allow rent backups, you didn't get a high-floor two-roomer without the ability to pay.

Stanley had an arcane, unfathomable system for allotting rooms, and certain floors were residents only, others transients, and some mixed. The Ninth floor was for well-heeled residents, several with families, some of whom had been there decades. A room or suite there meant either money or fame, so with Alistair it must have been money.

On the occasions he was semi-sociable, he was well spoken, not an obvious crazy, and was in fact quite a hansom chap, tall, thin, full head of blonde locks. His street clothes were Eighties preppy, not hip, and he spoke with an educated, New England accent. All told, quite presentable.

But the other Alistair was an entirely different proposition. Usually later at night, you would come across him mostly on his namesake Ninth floor, which I believe he was, in Mondo Alistair, protecting, patrolling. His outfit for for this duty was all-black shirt and jeans, a white cloak, an intricate replica knight's helmet, and a metre long sword, sharp as shit.

He wouldn't detail why he had to be so vigilant, so alert to perceived invasions or sorties by persons unknown. There were mumblings of dark forces, classic schizo ramblings about mysterious agents, but no master plan as far as I could determine. Chance visits to that floor would find him lurking, half hidden, in doorways and corridors, and he would step out, sword ready, only to sheepishly mumble “oh, hi” when he recognised you as a regular.

I'm not sure if he ever actually attacked anyone, though it must have been well daunting to innocent guests, unaware he was a fixture, part of the hotel's ambiance, faced with a wild-eyed and well armed knight, when they were expecting, what, Ginsberg?

This was background activity in the upper reaches of the hotel for at least a year, with nightly sightings of the avenging warrior, amid reports from tenants that he was deteriorating, getting crazier by the day, and was becoming potentially dangerous. However, before there was some lethal confrontation between him and some poor soul using the bathroom, the big incident happened.

I was returning from a day labouring in my South Bronx workshop, mind full of measurements and deadlines, entering the lobby to find a full-on Fire Department incident, fire trucks, klieg lights, big-time equipment. The firemen had knocked a huge hole in one of the lobbies two feet thick walls, and there was water, smoke, chaos. Alistair was being unceremoniously stretchered out the front door, looking like he had just returned from the Battle of the Somme, filthy, bedraggled, and restrained, pinned to the gurney by wide straps.

A short diversion here to explain the construction of the hotel, necessary to understand what had happened. Most of the hotel's bathrooms have a small window for ventilation, not sight-seeing. They open onto vertical airshafts that run from the roof to the basement, dark, filthy, claustrophobic spaces that are criss-crossed with utility pipes, some ancient, some functioning. The windows themselves are tiny, maybe two feet wide, and designed to be air passages, not exits.

Alistair had, apparently, been lurking on his regular patrol when something, unknown to us, had spooked him, and he had hightailed it to his room, locking himself within. Certain that the invisible opposing forces were trying to gain entrance, he then further barricaded himself into the bathroom, and when that felt under siege, had somehow managed to get the tiny airshaft window open enough to climb through, and had done just that.

Meanwhile, people in the lobby, sat there minding their own business, started to hear strange noises from within the wall next to the fireplace. At first just odd, muffled sounds, these quickly escalated into shrieks and screams, accompanied by a rapidly spreading wet patch, soon to become

a cascade of dirty water.

Alistair had defenestrated through the tiny bathroom window, found nothing to support him there, and had fallen nine floors, with the water and utility pipes breaking his fall, and his fall breaking the pipes. He found himself at the bottom of the shaft, in three feet of ancient garbage, considerably damaged, with the narrow shaft rapidly filling with water from the broken pipes above. By the time the firemen broke through the wall, no easy feat given their thickness, Alistair was basically treading water, or, given how filthy and garbage filled it was, treading soup. Hundreds of gallons of this vile smelling slop, mixed with plaster, bits of masonry and at least one dead rat, engulfed the lobby, all accompanied by Alistair's wails and screams.

This was the point I arrived home. As with all such occurrences, the residents quickly assembled, offering opinions, theories, curses, with guests to the hotel oggling wide-eyed at this outrageous, spontaneous theatre. One would think such an episode, with crazy helmeted warriors dragged soaking from holes in the building, with an attendant tsunami of slurry, in any other of the cities hostelries, would have completely freaked-out any prospective guest, get me out of this madhouse.

At the end of this episode, clean-up operation underway, I watched a couple whose check-in had been interrupted by all the drama, now finally dealing with Jerry at the desk They were obviously not New Yorkers, but definitely Chelsea customers from the Great Out There, on a pilgrimage to the Bohemian shrine. He looked at her, both with a certain smile on their faces.

“I told you, didn't I?” he beamed “This place is the shit, the real shit”

“Yeah” she replied “ I wanna fucking live here”