

Chapter 8

The Grand Permute: New York on Moving Day

If you're not a resident of New York City, it is likely you have never heard of Moving Day. If you have never heard of Moving Day, it is likely you won't believe the first description of it you hear. To mitigate this—to inspire belief—I implore you to call a friend who lives in New York City and invite them to accompany you to a Disney Land on the next May 1 that rolls around (your treat, of course). They will decline, and politely inform you that May 1 is Moving Day. You will ask what Moving Day is. Happy you asked, they will set aside whatever they have planned for their day (assuming the day you are calling on is not May 1 itself) to shower you with tales from their repertoire of Moving Day stories. You will be surprised at how important this day is to your friend and you will ask them why they have never told you about Moving Day before. They will tell you that that is just how it is, and you better learn to accept that some things are how they are.

What is Moving Day? It is often referred to as a holiday, which is close to the truth. Large groups of people act outside their routines on Moving Day and the only people working on Moving Day are those for whom Moving Day activities directly rely upon (namely, movers). But holidays are times for rest and rejuvenation, and there is no room for any of that on Moving Day. Moving Day is the first day in the month of May. While specific traditions have come and gone over the years, three rules have stayed the same:

1. If you live in New York, you must change your place of residence.

2. Whatever apartment you end up in is yours.
3. Be cordial.

While many scholars are eager to discuss Moving Day's importance to the study of law, economics, and traffic science, its broader cultural impact is often overlooked. As a social phenomenon, it rivals that of the salad bar. It is the defining formative experience of every young New Yorker. It is on Moving Day that children first learn how to swear for comedic effect—on Moving Day that teens first help their mother out from under the couch, refrigerator, or grand piano that is crushing her. Moving Day has existed for centuries, and will for many more. Only on Moving Day does the Statue of Liberty cry tears for every kind.

Moving Day Traditions and Basics

Preparations for Moving Day begin long before the day itself. On February 1, landlords put out their annual notice, a memo nailed to each apartment door detailing useful facts for interested parties, such as how much rent next year's tenants will be responsible for, whether or not pets are allowed to smoke, and at most two (2) riddles. In colonial times, landlordism was paradoxically considered an ignoble practice and yet it was one dominated by nobility. Landlordism was for greedy, ugly, controlling, rich landowners. And these lords of the land were nothing if not a direct product of nepotism. Even as late as 1800, two in every three landlords were direct descendants of the Duke of York himself. In modern times, however, landlords come

from a variety of socioeconomic classes: upper, upper middle, and lower upper middle—to name a few.

In the early Spring months, landlords strut about the city swinging bejeweled canes and wearing silver tiaras and fur coats. They hand out bottled water with an intense aggression, knowing that a well-hydrated pedestrian is a curious pedestrian and thus one susceptible to hearing just what their apartment can offer. But come May 1, you'd be hard-pressed to tell a landlord from a landlesslord. They too need a place to live.

For most families, the Moving Day season works as follows. Roughly between the ides of March and those of April, adults search for an apartment. They organize their finances, scout potential neighbors, and practice the walk from their current apartment to their ideal future place of residence. In school, children immerse themselves in Moving Day training exercises (mostly squats and dead lifts). By Moving Day Eve, all serious preparation has been done. Families gather in their common room to decorate gingerbread apartments; bagels are boiled, baked, torn apart, and dipped in the hot-'n'-fresh eggnog (fuel for the long tomorrow ahead of them).¹ Finally, a cherished irreplaceable possession, often a family photo or a childhood trinket, is destroyed as a sacrifice to Hermes, the Greek god of logistics.²

Although these annual activities are central cultural elements of Moving Day, no less important is the jovially cynical attitude shared ubiquitously across the city. Much like how a nation is unified by a common enemy in wartime, New Yorkers see the horrific chore of Moving Day and it fills

¹ On the rare occasion that Moving Day and Mothers Day collide, it is traditional to carry mothers on an armchair, palanquin-style.

² And sometimes the trinket from childhood is a stuffed animal. And sometimes that stuffed animal is an adorable hedgehog named

Dear management,

My name is Vincent Baldovini. I've worked as a doorperson at Fredrick's 5th Avenue Luxury Apartments since I was sixteen years old. Not once have I been upset with the decisions of management. Not once. Not until I got to work today and saw that they were installing a *revolving fucking door*.

Listen: Doors aren't meant to be circles. You can't open a circle. It's something from science, I think, that the circle is the only shape you cannot open. Do I stand inside or out? Say hello? Spend my days walking in circles demonstrating how to use this new technology? It's utter bullshit.

Look: I work with people from every walk of life. I've held doors for families of *dozens* carrying not one, not two, not three, but six Craigslist couches! I've held the door for a group of twentysixsomethings trying to start a commune in the penthouse suite. I'll even hold the door for your goddam dog. Who in God's realm will I hold a revolving door for? My pay will stay the same, I've been told. Then I was assured I will "find something to do." True, perhaps. But I can guarantee that whatever I do, I won't be as good at it as I am at holding the door.

Sincerely,
Vinny

Fig 8.1. An email from Vincent Baldovini, shortly before his promotion to Head of Doors at Fredrick's 5th Avenue Luxury Apartments.

them with the uncrushable energy that one can only get from being part of a true community. To keep this sense of

John von Neumann. And sometimes the child from whom the stuffed animal is taken is not ready to see it decapitated with a box cutter.

community strong, New Yorkers allow themselves to talk about Moving Day to outsiders, but do not allow themselves to bring it up. Discussions about Moving Day are vampiric. They need to be invited in.³

Moving Day in Literature

For outsiders, Moving Day is chaos incarnate. Take this passage from the opening chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*:

There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes. Calm and settled, a passerby might say. But look! Peer inside! You'll find—what's this?—the city is the same as a whale. Majestic from afar, but reminiscent of a muddled pile of stray viscera when killed and scattered about. But why should a city be killed and scattered about? Tell me, if you have an answer, how this outpour of furniture and ornaments came to be. I've seen shipwrecks more put-together than this city.

I asked a man, "Man! how have you so many barrels?" The man took a long pause. It appeared that my vexation was the cause of his. He eventually answered.

"They are for my things."

Moving Day literature written by New Yorkers is often more nuanced. While Melville was shocked by a single instance of

³ The details here are murky. For example, you will never see this book (*A Living, Breathing, Coughing History of New York City*) in an advertisement precisely because it contains a single chapter about Moving Day. We are, however, allowed to pay 'people of influence' to accidentally leave this book on coffee tables of parties they crash.

Moving Day, it is the day's persistence throughout the centuries that shocks those who call the city home. Since its inception in 1850, *Harper's Magazine* has published an annual issue comprised of various accounts of the day. Throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, writing about Moving Day was one of the most fashionable things an aspiring author could do. In 1921, Karen Felton wrote:

By an established custom, the [houses](#) are let from this day [May 1st] for the term of one year certain; and, as the inhabitants in general love variety, and cannot reside in the same [house](#) for two consecutive years, those who must change, which is precisely the whole city, must be all removed together. Hence, from the peep of day till twilight, may be seen carts which go at a rate of speed astonishingly rapid, laden with furniture of every kind, racing up and down the city, as if its inhabitants were flying from a pestilence, pursued by a gleeful death with his broad scythe ready to mow them into eternity.

On May 2, 2015, singer-songwriter Anne Park tweeted:

Moving day sucks. i love it.

The many paradoxes of Moving Day have made it an excellent source of comedy.⁴ David Sedaris penned a rant for NPR in the year 1998 about a particularly awful Moving Day

⁴ Perhaps Moving Day's deep connection to comedy is why the legal punishment for not moving on Moving Day (a punishment that has not seen serious use in the last 300 years) is to be strapped into a pillory in the middle of Times Square and publically tickled for twenty-four hours. The famous SNL skit "Tickle Me, Elmo"

he had, in which each apartment he found was inexplicably filled by families of pigeons he was too afraid to evict. “Pigeons don’t play by any set of rules, much less mine,” wrote Sedaris, “They peck and they scratch and they poop indoors and yes—I do all these things too—but I’m not such a dick about it.”

Moving Day and Sex

Ever wonder what makes new car smell go away? It’s sex. And on Moving Day, every apartment has a new car smell that’s just begging to be banged into oblivion.

How prevalent is sex on Moving Day? It’s not uncommon for two or more couples to be so involved in their love making that each forgets to make sure their new apartment is empty. If they don’t find the other couple by midnight, then by the Second Rule of Moving Day they’re contractually obligated to share the apartment in the year to come. It is impossible to collect statistics on Moving Day sex rates, but consider this: maternity wards are reliably double-staffed the first two weeks of February to accommodate the large uptick in the birthrate.

What makes people so reliably horny on May 1? It can be many things. There are a variety of displays of sexual fitness filling the streets—people lifting tables, people lifting chairs, people lifting couches, people lifting boxes. Some are simply swept up in the rush of the day; others use sex as a de-stressor. But for a particular group of fetishists, it is the furniture itself that is arousing. “Splinter dick” is a common problem faced by these fine folks, and it’s a problem that’s about as pleasant as it sounds.

satirizes this punishment by telling the story of a book club full of horny mothers that refuse to move on Moving Day.

The Spirits of Moving Day

A haunted [house](#) is never a good investment. Their market value regularly lags behind certified sprit-free and demon-free properties. They are assets with exceptionally poor liquidity—except when their walls cry blood. Moreover, buying a [house](#) can be a life-long commitment, and nobody wants to die in a [house](#) that is already occupied by some other person’s ghost. Haunted apartments are an entirely different story. Beloved by artistic types and wine moms alike, haunted apartments offer all the excitement of living with a supernatural entity without the long-term commitment.

The first human to specialize in ghost realty was Los Angeles realtor Sue Stanford. Capitalizing on America’s rising belief in ghosts (Fig. 8.2), in 1966 Sue founded Ghost Free Homes, a real-estate agency specializing in avoiding haunted properties. But while Sue’s mission was to help her clients avoid the paranormal, New York realtors jumped on the chance to find—and even forcibly create—spirit-occupied abodes. By 1970 it seemed as through every realtor had an exorcist in their rolodex, eager to destroy a ghost’s relationship with the building it had died in.⁵ Then, the mad ad people of Madison Avenue would aggressively target these traumatized ghosts with oft-fabricated claims of ectoplasm leaks in other buildings, tricking them into re-locating to a building of the realtor’s choice.

Such psychic warfare was not tolerated in the supernatural community for very long. By the mid 1980’s, ghosts, ghouls, demons, and rats had formed a robust tenants’ union. They managed to shift the public perception on the topic of predatory advertising, arguing that the

⁵ While ceilings and floors are formalities for ghosts, the rules of Moving Day are not. But come May 1, most ghosts prefer to simply haunt the same building from another floor.

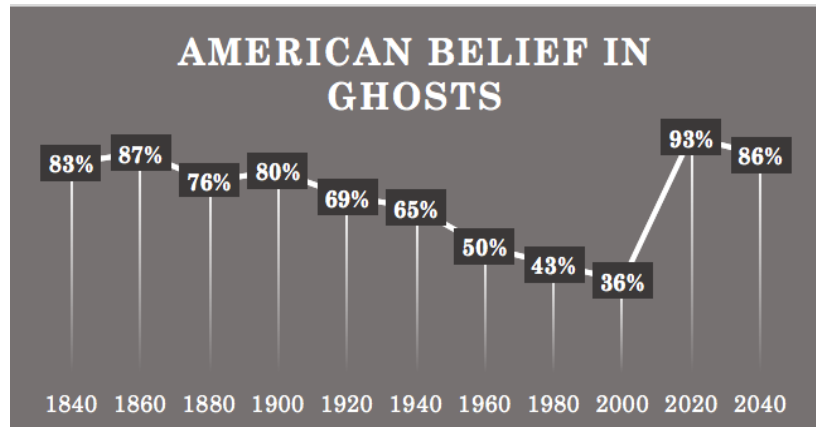


Fig 8.2. A graph depicting American belief in the existence of ghosts, per data gathered by the United States General Census. Key pivot factors include the gradual deterioration of religion in the 20th century and the indisputable scientific proof of ghosts made known to the public by the Discovery Channel in 2005.

industry's sole function is to take in money and produce irrational thought. And who could achieve eternal peace in a world like that?

By the time the third millennium reared its ugly malformed head, most ghosts were living independently from human influence. They even had a city of their own: Hart City, located on Hart Island (a part of the Pelham Islands archipelago located 2km from Central Park). By the year 2000, Hart Island was home to a population of more than two million ghosts.

Moving Week

In September of 1963, a radical idea was suggested by mayoral candidate John V. Lindsay. He campaigned on the idea of Moving Week. His suggestion was that in the first



Fig 8.3. Hundreds of ghosts cannot be seen attending the Hart Island Cemetery's annual gala as ghosts do not appear in photographs. They are invisible.

week of May, every resident of New York would be required to switch apartments. They would be guaranteed residence in the place they ended the day in. Ideally, people would act with a general kindness towards each other during this week, as it would be a somewhat stressful time for all.

Lindsay's ideas were almost universally lampooned. Some pointed out the inherent absurdity in giving people a full week to move their things. It seemed like an unnecessarily generous amount of time. A cartoon published in the *New Yorker* suggested that if moving was given a full week, New Yorkers would grow lazy and entitled, preferring to sleep on their beds rather than move them. Others painted Lindsay's ideas as anti-New York, claiming he would grow

power-hungry and impose more unnecessary changes that would alter every aspect of daily, weekly, and annual life. New York spun into a panic. Residents worried about what would come next if Lindsay was elected. Would he require pizzas to be sold by the pie instead of the slice? Would he make cars drive underground and have subways fill the sky?

Lindsay had his supporters. They were mostly a grab-bag of special interest groups including the Occult, the Fireman's Bureau, and people who use printer paper when they must sneeze but have run out of tissues. These groups made up no more than 2% of New York's population, but even so, it was enough to scare some New Yorkers into taking action. John V. Lindsay was killed by multiple gunshots on November 1 at 9:00am. The police concluded that there were at least 17 shooters that had fired simultaneously.

Lindsay's death provides a rare example of when a conspiratorial assassination was successful not only in its immediate execution, but in the advancement of agenda. Discussion of Moving Week died as quickly as Lindsay. However, threats to Moving Day are always present. Recently, in January of 2036, the University of Toronto announced their completion of a working quantum teleporter. They claim the device is polytime scalable. Most of the project's \$40 billion in funding came from U-Haul International. They have successfully teleported a horse.

Many worry that technological advancements will ruin Moving Day in both practice and in spirit. It is important to remember that the invention of the dolly did not kill moving day. Nor did the invention of the cardboard box, or of the sidewalk, or of asking a friend for help. For better or for worse, Moving Day is here to stay.

Moving Day: A Day for Moving On

When I pitched to my editor a chapter in which I share my own Moving Day story, she initially shot it down. There's no room in a history book for personal anecdotes from the author, she told me. History is meant to be impartial, or at the very least an accumulation of biases that belong to people other than just the author. I then told her of an important aspect of Moving Day that had so far been overlooked. I told her of how, because our graves are our final homes (our "places of final residence"), in 1820 it became law that New Yorkers were only allowed to bury their dead on Moving Day. I begged her not to make me interview someone else on this matter. I told her of how horrible it can be waiting for months with the corpse of a loved one sitting around your apartment, how you would like to move the body, but you're worried of condemning the attached soul to eternal vagrancy. I told her of how after marking off every day between your loved one's passing and May 1 you never want to see a calendar again. I told her stories of grandparents who had ended their own lives in the final week of April to ensure a speedy transition into their underground home. I eventually convinced my editor not that it was a good idea for me to tell my story, but that I would be incapable of telling anyone else's. So here it goes.

My mother died on Sunday, May 7th 2029. Six days into the renters' year. I had moved in with her that March following a breakup with the man who would (four years later) become my husband. I'm not sure what exactly killed her. I did know that information at some point, I think. But I don't remember it now.

I had gone to a used book store to buy some new used books on the day of. Mom's collection had been irrecoverably damaged that Moving Day when I bumped our dolly into a trashcan and spilled her book box into the street. I wanted to

surprise her by finding new versions on her favorites. She loved old books, and the more she could tell the book had been touched, the better. When I came back to our new place, she was lying face down on the kitchen floor.

Death is a mess of bureaucratic requirements. Each day I would try to complete at least one task to move forward. There was her bridge club partner to inform, an obituary to write. I was given five death certificates by the doctor who declared her dead. I put them up on the fridge for a week, but took them down, disgusted by my own morbid joke. There were nights I wanted to crawl into bed with her and read and re-read her favorite passages from Roald Dahl, like she used to do for me.

Eventually most of the paperwork was done. I had gotten used to the cold temperatures needed to slow down my mother's decomposition to a manageable rate.⁶ She had to look nice for the funeral that was more than half a year away, after all. Months passed. I have found no way to capture in writing how long they felt. I just write "Months passed," and skip past, for your benefit, the hardest part of my life.

My twin and I fought on the phone. She refused to come back to New York. She said she was afraid of getting trapped again. I tried and failed to get in contact with my dad. My mother told me he had left us when she got pregnant. "We never lived together," she would always remind us. I never understood that.

The funeral was all mine to plan. My mother had many friends. She was incredibly interesting. Many friends, and very little family. Come Moving Day, I had already arranged with my next-door neighbor to swap apartments

⁶ 33.2° F for the body, which should be kept near but not on ice. This is assuming your local morgue refuses to loan you a body fridge. Keeping the body that cold means the room you store the

with him—to give me time to setup the funeral. I finished moving by noon, the only thing not having changed apartments being my mother, her coffin, and the dolly it rested upon. The service began at 2pm. Most had heard my eulogy already, so it was unable to surprise. But the tears came anyway, for them and for me.

They day was going as planned. I moved my things, I got dressed, I sat and talked and sat again. The funeral processed to the gravesite. The hole had been pre-dug. As far as I could tell it was six feet deep. The day was going as expected. I had not been lacking in time to prepare. I was desperately ready to move on. I knew I would visit my mother's grave. But I also wanted to take some time off from seeing her—at least a month, maybe a year. My friends knew this. My therapist knew this. I knew this.

So you can image my horror when the casket-lowering device got jammed. It was as though God had reached out of the grave and was pushing against it. Half in, half out, the casket stayed put. Time flattened. I began to worry another year had already passed. I thought about staying there until barely before midnight. I figured I could make it back to my apartment if I left at a quarter 'til. The subway was too risky on Moving Day, even for someone with no things and nobody to keep track of.

Then the device started moving again.

body in can't be warmer than 40° F and your apartment is lucky to get to 65° F.

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