

THE NINETEEN-SEVENTIES

It was the 1970s, a really spectacular time for avant-garde art in New York City. Lanie packed up her life as a schoolteacher in Wisconsin and moved into a tenement building on the Lower East Side.

Lanie was full of avant-garde artistic ambition. She dabbled in painting and wrote poetry, and also, she wanted to make films. But after a couple months of living alone, Lanie realized that she felt stifled, artistically. She needed to be part of all of the action.

So she began to browse the Classifieds section of the newspaper for a new apartment. Downtown—that was the place to be. That part of the city was absolutely bursting at the seams with young artists and creativity. Lanie found a listing for a room in Tribeca—a loft!—on Chambers Street.

She visited the place. The bedrooms were demarcated by Japanese screens and laundry piles, and the massive windows were overlaid with white grime left over from the Industrial Revolution, which cast the entire space in darkness. But the ceilings were high, and they exuded the exact brand of Bohemian charm she was seeking.

“I’ll take it!” said Lanie.

On Lanie’s first night in the Tribeca loft, she wore her favorite pair of red plaid bell-bottoms as she squatted over a camping stove, stirring a pot of instant wild rice. One of her new roommates emerged from behind one of the Japanese screens.

“Oh, hello!” said Lanie.

The girl said nothing. She walked over towards Lanie’s makeshift kitchen and sat down next to her.

“Would you like some rice?” asked Lanie.

The girl shrugged. She wore a black turtleneck and leggings.

“What kind of art do you do?” asked Lanie.

The girl turned to Lanie and, with a straight face, said, “Clowning.”

“Clowning?” Lanie was confused.

Just then, the front door opened, and Daniel, the guy who had originally shown Lanie the apartment, walked in. He was wearing a vintage-y French clown costume with a white ruffled collar, and a black felt bell-hat with three pom-poms aligned vertically down the front like a set of traffic lights that read, “stop, stop, stop.”

“Hey Lanie,” said Daniel. “I see you’ve met Chloe?”

“You’re a clown?!” Lanie blurted out.

“Well, Chloe would probably identify as a mime,” said Daniel. “But yeah,” he continued, unhooking the ruffled collar from around his neck. “Clowning is a really beautiful, underappreciated art form. It’s timeless, unlike the other shitty art happening in this city right now.”

Lanie wasn’t sure how to feel. She was new to New York, and therefore didn’t actually know much about what was actually going on in the art world. For all she knew, maybe art in New York did suck. On the other hand, though, she had a nagging suspicion that clowning was lame.

Kevin, another one of her roommates, was more of a gypsy-clown. He wore suspenders with one of those water-squirting flowers pinned on it, and practiced his accordion a lot in the apartment. Lanie did make some happy memories with Kevin; she would egg him on to juggle different assortments of objects, and that was fun, since he really could juggle a lot of zany objects at once.

But a typical interaction between Lanie and her roommates went along the lines of what happened one winter evening, when Lanie emerged from her corner-office bedroom and asked, casually, “So, where does Andy Warhol hang out nowadays?”

Kevin, Daniel and Chloe all looked up at her. Kevin’s face was covered in white cream make-up. Out from behind the black diamonds painted around his eyes, he stared at her.

“Who cares,” he said softly.

“Look at us,” said Daniel, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor, trying on different-colored tiny top hats and evaluating their effects in a mirror. “We’re sad, but also happy. In the future, irony will be pervasive, and we’ll have been at the forefront of that movement. Our work is the kind of art that’s guaranteed to mean something forever.”

“You should come to one of our clowning performances,” said Chloe.

Lanie did go to a clowning show or two, but she always stood in the back with her arms crossed, too shy to talk to anyone. She performed a similar act at all the subversive gallery openings, experimental concerts, and cutting-edge readings she attended, too.

Feeling like she’d completely failed to fit into the 70’s Downtown New York Art Scene, she decided to answer an advertisement she’d seen posted at the public library and move to an apartment on the Upper West Side. Then, she thought, maybe she’d try for a master’s degree at Columbia. Oh well.

It was Lanie’s last night in the Tribeca loft. She was in the middle of packing up her polyester button-down shirts when Daniel came home with some news.

“Andy Warhol invited us to clown at a party he’s throwing,” said Daniel.

He was panting and sweating, having hurried home in full clown garb and oversized shoes. He rushed over to a corner of the dark common room and began filling his

red and white polka-dot clowning bag with juggling balls. He plucked a cluster of pink helium balloons from the opposite corner.

“Wanna come?” asked Daniel.

“No, thanks,” said Lanie.

“Okay, bye,” said Daniel. He strutted out the door, the balloons bobbing lightly behind him.