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HABITATS/Lower Fifth Avenue; An Author Discovers, And Then Writes, 'The Best Place to Be'

By CELIA BARBOUR

IN 1970, not long after Lesley Dornen moved to New York City, she was asked out on a date. Ms. Dornen, a new college graduate from Ohio, was working in Midtown at a magazine published by the Girl Scouts of America. When the designated Friday evening arrived, "I came out of my office, and it was raining and there weren't any cabs available," she said. "I didn't know how to take the subway. I couldn't ask; I didn't dare. It was too shameful not to know. So I walked." Her destination was Park Avenue and 90th Street.

"I remember he dried my hair with a towel when I got there," she said.

Ms. Dornen, 60, whose first novel, "The Best Place to Be," is being published this month by Simon & Schuster, is not a natural-born New Yorker -- not one of those people who seem to intuit the rules of urban life the moment they arrive. For her, getting the hang of this city took more than the usual amount of effort. "For a long time, I was very dependent on my girlfriends," she said. "They were my family."

And yet if you saw her today -- an elegant bohemian emerging from her apartment building on lower Fifth Avenue, with her handsome husband on her arm or her yellow Lab trotting nobly by her side -- you might sigh and covet her life for a moment, because she looks for all the world like a character from a classic Manhattan fairy tale.

Ms. Dornen is petite. (At 6 feet 2, her husband, Quentin Spector, is more than a foot taller than she is.) She has huge eyes, delicate features and ringlets of red-gold hair, giving her an elfin kind of prettiness. But she is hardly a flibbertigibbet. "I am the opposite of flighty," she said. "And the word is not 'grounded.' I hang on by my fingernails and have to be pried away."

Her tenacity kept her in New York despite two bouts of severe depression and a spate of anxiety attacks that beset her early years here. "I fell apart around age 30," she said. "I had to. And I had to put myself back together." Staying put felt like a necessary part of the process. For the last three decades, Ms. Dornen has inhabited only two apartments, barely three blocks apart.

She inherited the first of them from her best friend's fiancé when they married. It was a small one-bedroom on 11th Street between Fifth Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas. "It was my first real home," she said. "I grew myself up there. I took my life into my own hands."

She also paid about \$350 in rent. "Those were the days when you could throw yourself at your landlord's feet and cry, 'Do you have to raise my rent that 2 percent?' and he'd say, 'O.K., I'll give you a break because I think you're going to make it,'" she said.

She met her husband in 1990 through New York magazine. "I met a good guy," she said. "I advertised!" And although Mr. Spector's apartment was considerably bigger than hers, he put his belongings in storage and moved to 11th Street. "I don't know that I gave it a lot of thought," said Mr. Spector, a man described by his wife as "modest" and "grounded," and who dislikes being photographed or interviewed. "I just liked her apartment better."

When it came time for them to look for a bigger place, "I was adamant that I didn't want to move off 11th Street," Ms. Dormen said. "Off that exact block." But a search turned up nothing, so they began considering TriBeCa lofts.

Then on Christmas night in 1992, Ms. Dormen was coming home from a party. She was alone because Mr. Spector had stayed in bed with a bad back. In the doorway of her building, she was mugged at gunpoint. "After that, my whole mind-set changed -- to 'doorman,'" she said.

She saw an advertisement for a building around the corner, and went to check out the apartments. The first was a dud. "It was the real estate version of an amuse-bouche," she said. Then she was shown another, a corner apartment overlooking Washington Square Park. "I walked into this place and it was that cliché: I felt like I was at home," she said. "I walked through it as if I was in a trance."

She began to notice details: lots of shabby chintz, a cat, empty vases cramming the little-used kitchen, a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award tucked away on shelves in the study. "I knew this was Wendy Wasserstein's apartment," Ms. Dormen said. She took it as a good omen. In 1993, she and Mr. Spector bought the apartment for just under \$390,000. They held their wedding there two years later.

At that time, Mr. Spector was working for the Municipal Assistance Corporation, and his office was in the World Trade Center. In the evenings, Ms. Dormen would stand in the windows of their apartment, and Mr. Spector would stand in his office and flick his lights on and off, and Ms. Dormen could see it. "It was like that walkie-talkie fantasy from when you're a kid," she said.

By 2001, Mr. Spector had taken a job uptown, as a money manager for a hedge fund, and Ms. Dormen, after years of writing articles on relationships for women's magazines, had begun work on her novel, set mostly in Greenwich Village, and which she described as a "love letter" to her neighborhood. In the evenings, Mr. Spector would walk through the front door and say, "In all the world, our nest is best."

Ms. Dormen agreed. "There's a peacefulness and harmony here," she said. On a recent Friday morning the only frenetic element in their otherwise serene apartment is the heartily wagging tail of Eliza, the couple's Labrador retriever. She came to live with them in November, after being released by the Guiding Eyes organization, a group that trains dogs to help the handicapped. Eliza wasn't cut out for that life. "For Eliza, it was squirrels," Ms. Dormen said. "She couldn't get her mind off squirrels. She's a dog."

Ms. Dormen had added her name to the Guiding Eyes waiting list four years earlier -- enough time, as it turns out, for Mr. Spector to adjust to the idea of having a dog. "Quentin did not want a dog. No dog," Ms. Dormen said. "I'm a really good waiter. I waited a long time to get married. I waited a long time to be mentally sound. I waited a long time for a dog. It's not that I'm patient. Quentin calls me 'hands-on-hips girl.'"

But, as with so many aspects of her life, perseverance paid off. Eliza was worth it. Even Mr. Spector agrees. "Eliza won me over from the get-go," he said. "We went and met her and she was beautiful."

These days Ms. Dormen is perfectly capable of getting herself to 90th and Park with dry hair in even the worst downpour, but she prefers to stay closer to home. "I hate leaving here," she said. "The rule about my life is that everything has to be within walking distance of my apartment."

She added, "It's the best place I could possibly think of to be."