



## Appearances

The retired Zoe Mitchell is making her bed for the last time in the 480-square foot, second-floor pied-à-terre at Pomander Walk on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The gated mews is one of the best kept real estate secrets in New York City and has been Zoe's demure home away from her Florida home for 20 years.

Toting her oxygen contraption around the bedroom does not help. To Zoe, it is a symbol of all that is wrong with her life. A drag, it is as awkward as a college freshman's book bag, or luggage towed through an airport at the end of a business trip, or a carton of legal papers from a messy divorce.

Despite her lumbering bedroom air conditioner, the day is so hot Zoe could be in St. Petersburg at her Coffee Pot Bayou mansion instead of in the middle of her May-to-October Manhattan stay. She smooths the bedspread. Her aches are sharp and inescapable. She walks as though crossing barefoot on a beach strewn with broken shells.

As Zoe sets pillows "just so" in her eternal bid to keep up appearances, beads of sweat pop up on her brow and ringlets form on her well-coiffed white hair. This year, there are

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no outings to make a grand entrance with that hair at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or an outdoor concert at Lincoln Center. No strolls through the Central Park Conservatory Gardens or leisurely lunches at the right restaurants. There is a dwindling supply of oxygen, energy, and friends. There is the task of making the bed.

Zoe fluffs her lace-edged house coat. She wonders what could possibly distract her from this miserable point in her life. The 94<sup>th</sup> Street to 95<sup>th</sup> Street mews between Broadway and West End is a favored haunt for local and touring birds, and they faintly call to her. Zoe makes her way into the living room and flings open the casement windows, setting the sites of her binoculars on a pair of Cardinals.

Even the shadow of a Broadway high rise cannot mar Pomander Walk. Along the facing two-story Tudor and brick houses, trellises are draped with roses waiting for a gardener's hose. Most of Zoe's neighbors have graced their window boxes with flowers. Three of the boxes also hold lounging cats. The mews' walk is edged with curving hedges and flower beds.

Zoe hears the squeak of the garden faucet as Jonathan from #19 sets to watering his flowers. His little girl, Phoebe, mopes on the front stoop, hands cupping her eight-year old face. Phoebe squeals as Jonathan turns the hose on her. Zoe sees the little girl protests too much, by turns hiding her face from his misting and jutting her chin up to the sky, shouting a plaintive, "Daddy!"

Phoebe dashes along the walk until out of range of the sprinkling and Jonathan turns the hose back on the flowers. She slinks toward him as the three cats and Zoe watch.

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Jonathan whips the hose around at Phoebe, setting off more squeals and protests. Zoe laughs. The cats yawn.

Phoebe could be Zoe's own little girl of decades ago, ever in the shadow of her daddy, twirling, jumping, skipping, running ... until she left home for boarding school, then grew to immerse herself in oceanography studies on the Left Coast and vanish from her mother's sight. Not so from the sight of her oceanographer father, with whom she shared a passion for the sea and a bemused and dim view of Zoe's escapades.

Watching little Phoebe, Zoe mourns her daughter's indifference to beautiful things - except when it came to the sea. For years, there had been no reply to Zoe's letters detailing the success of her string of ZM boutiques, or latest interior design or plastic surgery triumphs. Just silence.

Little Phoebe looks up at Zoe. "Mrs. Mitchell, see what Daddy is doing to me!"

Jonathan smiles up at Zoe, too. "Want to cool off fast?"

"Wouldn't that be grand? But the doctor won't let me climb the stairs except to see him and my hairdresser. And I can't be ruining my new hairdo, running with Phoebe, now can I?"

"I'd aim low." says Jonathan absently, his mind back on the flowers.

"Phoebe, why not bring up my mail and have some cookies...if that's alright with you, Jonathan?" Zoe asks, as befits their daily exchange.

"Yes, as always," comes his reply.

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Zoe turns back to her living room and switches on classical music. She checks her books, ceramic goose cookie jar, mint dish, and carved box concealing her medications on the coffee table.

Banished are the ornate ashtrays, cigarette holders, and lighters that had once dotted the room and sealed her fate. Zoe pops a mint into her mouth and confirms the bottles of Pellegrino under the skirted side table. She sits on the brown camelback sofa, its cushions covered with a matching fitted sheet.

Zoe determined that this sofa will be her domain until the inevitable ambulance comes for her at her last wizened breath. There will be no gurney jostled and angled out of an invalid's bedroom into the tiny hallway. The bed is made.

Phoebe scampers up the stairs with Zoe's mail. The matron and red-faced little girl sit across from each other. Zoe cranks on the living room air conditioner and nods an invitation to take a cookie. Phoebe gingerly lifts the goose head of the cookie jar, and says, "Tell me again about the tall birds where you live."

Zoe looks up from an open letter. "From what my cleaning service says, I'll be seeing them soon, because I must get back to Coffee Pot Bayou."

"Wish I could go with you and see Bird Island."

"Maybe someday you'll see it, dear," says Zoe, absently. "Anyway, the snow birds don't stay in Florida this time of year, but you could still observe herons, egrets and pelicans on the island."

"Pelican!" says Phoebe. "That's the bird that makes a big splash when it lands, like it's fallen out of the sky."

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“Just like us,” sighs Zoe.

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Phoebe’s dad promises to keep an eye on Zoe’s place as he and the taxi driver guide her down the Pomander Walk steps and out beyond a heavy metal gate that creaks under an ornate metal rooster. This is the most grueling leg of the journey to St. Petersburg.

Zoe settles into the taxi and then from the taxi to a LaGuardia Airport wheelchair. She is whisked through the terminal to a first-class seat for a flight to the Tampa International Airport, to another wheelchair and taxi ... until she has tipped the driver, glanced at her beloved Bird Island, and shut the door of her mansion to the glistening bayou waters.

Zoe’s cleaning service has tidied the place and turned up the central air conditioning.

She makes her way to a serene, all white, main floor bedroom and falls asleep.

Zoe awakens to the boom of 3 p.m. thunder, the drumming rain on the red tile roof, and streams of rainwater cascading from the storm gutters. She had feared she would not hear this glorious racket again and takes pleasure in the storm and her refuge.

Zoe phones a chic downtown restaurant and orders chilled gazpacho, assorted tapas and ceviche. She sits by a window with her binoculars to observe the comings and goings on Bird Island as she waits for her dinner. Zoe forces herself to lower the binoculars and examine the mansion’s wrecked boat dock, battered sailboat, and downed palm trees that have prompted this hasty trip.

She always thought of this as her daughter’s sailboat. And if her child ever makes an appearance, it must be shipshape. Plus, it would not do to leave a no-name stormy mess

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behind. Everything associated with Zoe must be beautiful. It is her trademark, even in the ZM boutiques she had sold long ago.

Zoe opens the Yellow Pages to *Carpenter*. A carpenter agrees to come at 10 a.m. to work up an estimate of the repairs to the dock and sailboat mast. A tree service crew will arrive at 11 a.m. to haul away the downed palms.

It is only 8 p.m. and Zoe is bored. She is rattling around the mansion with her oxygen tank and without the energy to *do* anything. A swim is out of the question, as are the weighty strength-training circuit in the gym and the billiard table in the game room. Her breathing is more labored tonight and she adjusts her oxygen.

Seated in her study, Zoe dashes off a cheery birdwatcher's note to Phoebe. She starts her computer to check her e-mail. The inbox is empty. She launches Google Earth to ease her restless spirit in a trip down memory lane.

First, Zoe keys the address of her childhood home. The Earth turns on the screen and Google stops for a satellite view of an 19<sup>th</sup> Century Connecticut farm. She zooms in to see the paddock, barn, and family cemetery near the woods that skirt the pasture. Next, she locates her Newport, Rhode Island college on Narragansett Bay and traces the Cliff Walk fronting its massive Victorian "cottage" neighbors. Smiling, she halts her tour to open the bar cabinet and splash Grand Marnier into a tumbler. She toasts the screen's happy memories.

Zoe resumes her virtual life search, zeroing in on the suburban Westchester, New York house where she had raised her only child and dispensed with a tediously unfaithful husband.

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Navigating Google Earth once more, Zoe crosses the continent to La Jolla, California and the Scripps Institution, circling the oceanography center to speculate about where her absent-minded 43-year old daughter might be these days, no doubt near her father and his wife de jour. Her last clue – a response to her New Year’s greeting – was an out of office e-mail announcing her daughter’s research voyage of unspecified length off the coast of New Zealand. With a shrug, Zoe ends her night’s tour with the Isle of Manhattan, Pomander Walk, and Coffee Pot itself, its shape reminiscent of an old-fashioned coffee pot.

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When the carpenter rings the bell the next morning, there is no answer. He checks his cell phone log and calls Zoe’s number. Awake in the bedroom, she listens as her phone rings on the floor by her nightstand, but she cannot move to reach it. Instead, she struggles to breathe as the irritated man drives away. Waves of nausea seize Zoe and her nose gushes blood. She is paralyzed with fear and appalled to see her nightgown and bed sheets covered with blood and the unsightly remnants of her feast.

By the time the tree service truck arrives, Zoe has managed to slide to the floor and dial 911. The medics strap her to a gurney, and wheel her out the door. Zoe sees a woman from the tree service and nods toward the dock. “Clean up that mess, you hear!” Zoe calls out as she is lifted into the ambulance. “Make it beautiful!”

It is the last thing Zoe says before an oxygen mask covers her face. Moments later, she is circled by a swirl of blue-gowned hospital staff. The team surrounds her, inserting breathing tubes, injecting drugs, and setting an intravenous in her arm. But Zoe dies

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with a splash into that sea of blue gowns, like a pelican that falls unceremoniously from the sky.

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Zoe's estate files her obituary and elegant photo to news outfits in New York, California, and Florida. The estate pays the woman from the tree service for her handiwork and she pays the carpenters she hired to repair the dock and sailboat.

Next, Zoe's remains are cremated. Instead of burial at the family cemetery in Connecticut, she had instructed that her ashes be shipped to an eco-friendly company in Sarasota, Florida, where they would become part of a reef habitat for sea life in the Gulf of Mexico.

The ashes are mixed with cement to form a 3' X 4' ecological reef pod. Back in Manhattan, Zoe's Pomander Walk neighbors gather around a computer to order six brass garden elves to be pressed into the cement around the pod's prominent brass name plate.

On a clear, calm morning, Zoe's decorated pod is lowered into the Gulf, a global positioning satellite record of it duly logged to guide any scuba-diving family or friends.

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Back from New Zealand, Zoe's daughter stands in her cluttered Scripps office, checking the bundles of mail and periodicals stacked in sliding mounds on her desk. Tanned to leather from years on the open sea, she wears her graying hair pleated in a French braid that trails down her back to a slim waist. She wears cut off jeans and no makeup or adornments - except for an elaborate tattoo of a Golden Sting Ray that curves around

her left calf. After reading a letter from Zoe's estate executor, she signs her acceptance of an inheritance of her mother's place on Coffee Pot Bayou.

Within weeks, Zoe's daughter and her partner are touring the mansion. They pause in Zoe's downstairs' bedroom and stare at the ugly stains on the white carpet and bed. Zoe's slippers, glasses and cell phone remain scattered on the floor. An oxygen tank leans against a chair. Her clothes are in an open suitcase.

"Oh, mother would *not* have liked leaving this mess," says her daughter, examining the carpet stain like the oddity it is in Zoe's world. Then, rubbing her hands together, she declares, "Let's sail to Sarasota and go for that dive!"

Zoe's daughter and her partner descend in scuba gear to the reef pods and fall in with its schools of fish. They pause to read each pod nameplate and, amid their bubbles, finally squint at a message on Zoe's plaque that makes them both wince and smile, "Ah, Darling, I knew I could get you to visit me here! I love you forever, Mother."

The divers ride back to the marina in silence. As they near the docked sailboat, Zoe's daughter calls the Left Coast on her cell phone, and her partner follows one side of the cheery conversation. "Daddy, well, of course *her* reef pod had the *biggest* nameplate of them all! ... Yes ... So, tomorrow I wrap it up with the realtor and the yacht broker ... and that's all she left – not counting Pomander and her gift to the Audubon. Anyway, I'll see you Tuesday."

Zoe's furnished pied-à-terre at Pomander Walk is sold, too; scooped up by Phoebe's aunt before it hits the market. As the little girl and her aunt tour the apartment one

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evening, Phoebe spots Zoe's binoculars on the coffee table next to the goose cookie jar.

A note taped to it reads, "For my friend, Phoebe, Happy Birding! Love, Mrs. Mitchell."

Phoebe skips outside with the binoculars. A handful of neighbors is gathered amid the flowers, sipping wine. Beaming, Phoebe displays the note and her new prized possession. Her father, Jonathan, lifts his wine glass, "Let's have a toast to our wonderful Zoe Mitchell!"

"Hear, Hear," they chime in. "To Zoe!"

"To the fabulous ZM!"

"To a great lady!"

Phoebe skips away, "To my friend."