

The Closely Guarded Secrets Of Manhattan Doormen

From adulterous naughtiness to 6-foot-long iguanas, the cheerful sentries see it all while watching over the snootiest buildings in the world.

By

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‘Tis the tipping season. Time to show appreciation for those making our lives better or easier: the hairdresser, the babysitter, the mail carrier.

But in Manhattan’s high-end buildings, there’s another category of helper to reward: the doormen. The Big Apple version of the British beefeater, proud and loyal standard-bearers guarding some of the most expensive real estate in the world.

In high-rise condos with 800 apartments and dozens of employees, workers generally receive \$5 to \$100 each. In the snootiest buildings, tips swing from the miserly to the munificent: \$50 to \$1,500.

Non-New Yorkers might assume our trusty doormen only open doors, hail taxis and accept packages. That’s like saying a nanny just wipes up spilled milk.



“We must think like engineers, architects, contractors, lawyers, gardeners, plumbers, firefighters, cops and parents,” said one super on Park Avenue. Photo: Getty Images

To gauge a proper tip, let's put ourselves in the doormen's shoes—the behavior they witness, the goods going up and down, the secrets they keep. They have to be quick on their feet and more discreet than career diplomats.

Especially on Fifth Avenue, where Astors and Vanderbilts built gilded “Millionaire's Row” overlooking Central Park. Here reside families with what Wall Street types call “serious money.” Heave open those massive front doors and peek inside. Wealth turbocharges everything within: bigger purchases, more frequent travel, grander entertaining. According to one sentry: “One thing's for sure: You're not in your world, you're in their world.”

Unless your guests parachute in, doormen announce each one and handle every delivery, from rib roasts to Rothkos. For the fancy-pants people, elevators open to one massive apartment per floor. With one set of garbage bins per tenant, there's no doubt who guzzled those empty Grey Goose bottles.

“We must think like engineers, architects, contractors, lawyers, gardeners, plumbers, firefighters, cops and parents, to name a few,” Lenny, a building super on Park Avenue, told me. And the requests never stop.

Certainly not from the four-dog, three-kid, full-on madness that is my apartment. These kind men have FedExed meds to our family during school break, placed dresses in a bag for a messenger to remedy my penchant for wardrobe malfunctions and emailed the forgotten term paper before 7th-grade English class. I trust them with everything in my life: They rifle through my medicine cabinet, wade through my messy closet and have the password to the family computer.

At 2 a.m. all over the city, these guys maneuver stoned-out-of-their-gourds teens through the lobby. For adults straying from the Ward and June Cleaver norm, the guardians follow the rule of speak no evil. They whisk the wife's trainer up the back for a post-workout romp or scurry the husband's mistress out the front. When queried about who gives the biggest tips, all agree it's the sneaky adulterers.

“Each and every day, these guys are heroic, standing at the post. They have tough tenants, different personalities to greet and interact with,” explains John Santos, secretary-treasurer of Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union, which represents 36,000 residential building service workers in the city. Doormen can make over \$28 an hour with good benefits. “These guys must be able to control their emotions in all situations.”



In Chelsea on the West Side, doorman Carlos faced a furious girlfriend trying to get in without permission. He called the tenant, who instructed him to go up first and hide everything in the den. “What do I see? Cocaine dust and razors on the glass table,” he recounted. “More powder in a little glass box. I wipe the whole table with a wet Kleenex. I think I’m clear and done. Then I look to my left: two huge bags full of money—easily \$100k in each bag. Birkin bags, but duffel size.”

Split-second decisions can be incriminating. A wife once called downstairs, and the super Lenny rushed up to help her elderly husband, who’d fallen off the bed. “Only then did I realize I was dealing with a dead body,” he recounted. “My Irish cop friend said, ‘Never touch a dead body; the wife could have just smothered him with a pillow for all you know. You could be an accessory to murder.’”

When a kid comes to the lobby with a more innocuous request, doormen like Michael Cartegena are eager to respond. “This one boy was a few years old when he came into the building,” the 36-year veteran working on 60th Street reminisced. “As he got older, he’d come down while I was working, and we’d talk about the Jets and sneakers. At 13, the family invited me to his bar mitzvah; he liked being around me.” When the kid became a chessmaster at 18, they’d play chess after work.

Mentorship is priceless—but a hefty tip helps too.

Then there are the frenzied or farcical requests that no doorman could see coming. Consider the courageous finance bro who, hours after Hurricane Sandy sucker-punched the city in 2012, descended to his 19th Street lobby with two masks and snorkels.

“This guy was obsessed with saving his new custom Surefoot ski boots in the flooded basement storage cage,” recounts my cousin, Jay Peterson, who was the president of the building board. “I said, you’re nuts. You’re not diving down there.”

But with the prospect of fresh powder on his brain, the tenant powered ahead. “This guy hands the doorman a mask and snorkel and said with a straight face, ‘Man, let’s do this!’” And the craziest part? They did. Jay confirms that a monster tip followed.

No building employees deserved fatter envelopes than the men next door to my friend Clara Bingham (author of the new book, “The Movement: How Women’s Liberation Transformed America”). Her 13-year-old son Henry had an illegal 6-foot pet iguana living it up in her apartment. They called him Biggie: He swished out of his astro-turf-lined walk-in closet with rap-star swagger. One day, Clara left her window open inches and came home to find: no Biggie anywhere.



Biggie the iguana hanging on for dear life above the streets of Manhattan. Photo: Clara Bingham

She looked down 13 stories: nothing. She looked left: “Biggie was hanging on a ledge of that other building, very wan and unhappy.” She rushed to tell the neighboring doorman to look up and said, “We rescue that huge iguana, or he falls and splatters all over 81st Street. It’ll be violent and grotesque.”

The doorman grabbed two maintenance guys and rushed Clara into an apartment whose family wasn’t home. Five feet below a window, Biggie was hanging on for dear life. Clara crawled onto the sill. The maintenance men grabbed her by the ankles and lowered her down, and Clara grabbed Biggie with a huge fishing net.

“They were absolutely heroic,” she said. “Ready to act, didn’t question anything.”

There was one constant I encountered through all these tales of craziness and chivalry: Every tenant I interviewed claimed to be their building's biggest tipper.

But generosity at this season comes from all directions. One year, I wasn't sure I'd handed a tip envelope to Carmine, the perennially silent overnight doorman in my building. When I asked, he said he had no recollection—in fact, no way of knowing.

I was confused: “Carmine, how can you not know?” Surely, he wouldn't overlook my thick, biggest-tipper-east-of-the-Mississippi envelope.

“I never open them,” he explained. The man who never speaks spoke more. “I drop them at the Children's Hospital on my way home.”

Now that's the Christmas spirit. In real time.

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