

M&M

MANNERS & MISDEMEANORS



HOLIDAY GIVING

TIPPING POINTS

When you're a doorman—not to mention art installer, animal rescuer, bodyguard, and babysitter—is \$100 really too much to ask?

BY HOLLY PETERSON

THE \$100,000 RANGE ROVER SPORT pulls up to the building's baronial awning. It's a 2015 model and the SUV of the moment for the Upper East Side set—out of stock everywhere, yet ubiquitous around here. Chauffeur and nanny help unload apocalypse-ready quantities of paper towels and Tide from a run to the Costco in Harlem, an errand designed to save their boss about \$43. At the precise moment these goods are loaded onto the brass luggage cart, the doorman signs for a \$325 rib roast for the same family from Lobel's butcher shop, the only place this crowd buys a piece of meat.

The doorman scratches his head at the contradictions implicit in the bounty before him, but he's used to the madness. He'd better be. It's only 9:15 in the morning, and there's much more to come. This is the world of the Upper East Side doormen, who guard the front gates for a strange breed of people whose hands seldom turn a doorknob.

As the holiday season approaches, the contact between the owners of these cooperatives and their sentries becomes increasingly close. Christmas trees need to be lugged through the service gate, along three basement hallways, and up the back elevator, then placed in stands in the palatial apartments upstairs—a quarter-mile detour designed to avoid the deposit of a single pine needle on the lobby floor. There are more parties, requiring more access scrutiny and

coat checks. And it's tip time for these men, who earn \$45,000 a year, pretax, while securing apartments worth dozens of millions. A crucial question for many Upper East Siders is this: how much to give the people who do everything from keeping an eye on the kids to FedExing that forgotten Missoni bathing suit to Palm Beach? It's a topic that invites obfuscation, lies, ego-jockeying, and heated competition over who's the biggest tipper—or who wants to appear to be. In hushed conversations over eggnog in apartments decorated for the holidays by teams of florists, tipping remains a constant source of anxiety. How do you appropriately compensate someone you can't live without?

On the surface there's a great divide between the uniformed person who opens the door and the Céline-clad woman who strolls through it, but in reality it's an extremely intimate relationship. These men do so much more than operate doorknobs and car handles. They assemble bunk beds, walk dogs on snowy nights, fix ovens and save Thanksgiving dinners, help elderly tenants get on their feet after a fall and calm them down if they need ambulances, and even hang masterpieces that have come home after a loan to a nearby museum.

Many residents try to figure out what the others are giving so as not to stand out as the building's cheapskate. "You try to keep it even," says one East Side socialite, "but then one bratty kazillionaire triples the amount and becomes the favorite tenant"—on the assumption that his Lobel's steaks will be rushed to the building fridge faster than other tenants'.

For years Upper East Siders who make a sport of comparing their cushy lifestyles to those of people they suspect have it even cushier have whispered that at 740 Park Avenue, possibly the city's most expensive, notorious, and chronicled address, the doormen take in \$1,200 in holiday tips from each of the 31 apartment owners. That figure seems to be exaggerated hearsay, even for 740. A nonscientific study of residents and doormen in the ultralux buildings of Park and Fifth avenues reveals that the vast majority of doormen receive something in the range of \$200 to \$500, with a few tenants tipping only \$50 and others giving more than \$1,000. Doormen we spoke to confidentially agree that there is no correlation between the wealth of the resident and the size of the tip. Of the few stingy folks who fall at the bottom end, one Fifth Avenue doorman had this to say: "Sometimes I'd like to tell them that I'd rather not get anything than get \$30. But I don't, of course." Edward Bonilla, who has been an Upper East Side doorman for nearly three decades, has seen a wide range of



Donna Distefano
Handcrafted Fine Jewelry
Est. 1994 • New York City
www.DonnaDistefanoLtd.com
212-594-3757

MANNERS & MISDEMEANORS

generosity but is full of praise for his tenants. "I've made a lot of money with tips over the years," he says. "One person offered me shares in a small company that went up quite a bit; that's a gift that keeps on giving for my family."

Potential buyers—and future tippers—should weigh the quiet power that doormen wield. One real estate agent tells the story of an apartment that had an accepted bid for upward of \$20 million from a female buyer. "All seemed set, her application was in, and the designer had even been in to measure for curtains," the agent says. "All that was left was the board interview, which means you're in unless you spit on them. She got turned down. I asked the super and he said she'd been horribly rude to the doorman of 27 years, who told the board president, 'This woman is going to create a lot of trouble.' And so she lost the apartment, even after winning the bid and with solid financials."

Columnist Cindy Adams, who relies on her doorman for packages as well as safety, underscores the intimacy of the relationship, admitting that she often answers the door while in her pajamas. "They see absolutely everything," she says. "They know more than your psychiatrist or your colon doctor. They know what husband is having an affair, what wife is having a guy up, and even what time the guy left the next morning. They know what medications are being delivered and who's a boozer. Could they write a book? Yes, and they'd get rich doing it."

They could also hit the jackpot just by logging their activities in a day and charging market value for what a professional would get for the services rendered. (Simply having a painting hung straight by the experts recommended by New York galleries costs more than \$250.) Some requests are almost impossible to put an adequate price on. A few years ago the journalist, author, and newspaper heiress Clara Bingham asked her doorman to hang

her out of her 12th-floor window so she could rescue her son's five-foot-long iguana, Biggie (named after rapper Biggie Smalls). "Biggie had been on the ledge for 48 hours, and he was paralyzed," she says. "Two building staff rushed up, and we all knew what had to be done. They lowered me out, holding on to my ankles. I grabbed Biggie and pulled him in."

And what about the kids who grow up in the warped world of these service-oriented buildings? One 17-year-old private school senior told me, "If the doormen ever changed shifts, I wouldn't come home after a party. John, the guy who works from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., has known me since I was wearing smock dresses at Episcopal nursery school. If he saw me in a short skirt after a few shots of tequila at 1 a.m., it would be more shameful than my dad seeing me in that state. I wouldn't come home to face John like that. Ever." How much would these parents tip to earn that level of respect?

Perhaps this real-life *Gossip Girl* character need not worry. "All doormen are incredibly discreet," says Héctor Figueroa, president of 32BJ SEIU, the doormen's union. "That's the thing that we understand: that all tenants depend on the services. I think doormen take a lot of pride in their job." Most tenants respect the elegance and seriousness of their doormen. Tipping might seem an easy equation—a polite token of appreciation for services rendered—but the richer people are, the more they compete over how rich they are. So they like to "casually" mention how generously they "always" tip. Thing is, only the doormen know for sure. It's easy, while crunching into a parmesan crisp 10 floors above, to go on about your largesse. Case in point: Almost every wealthy person interviewed off the record for this piece claimed to have hard evidence that he or she was the biggest tipper in the building. •

The GIVING Tree You couldn't make it through the year without them. How to avoid cheapskate status.

	REGULAR BABYSITTER	NANNY, CHEF, CHAUFFEUR	UBER DRIVER	LAWN GUY	DOG WALKER	HAIRSTYLIST	MAIL CARRIER	MAITRE D'
AVERAGE JOE	Double the nightly wage	2-6 weeks pay	\$0. Gratuity is auto-included	\$20 and a beer	Starbucks gift card	Champagne; chocolate; 30% tip	Card or a cup of hot chocolate	Handshake and \$100
MONEY BAGS	Apple Watch	25% of yearly salary and/or a car, computer, or year of college	Amp up your app's tip	\$200	\$300 or new Nikes	Watch; cashmere blanket; designer clothing; 40% tip	Gift card. They can't accept cash or items worth more than \$20	\$400-\$1,000 (or leave your mink at coat check)

