

Janet Mason

Cliff Dwellers

They were going to see George tomorrow evening. He was throwing a small party to celebrate the completion of his painting, *Nude With A Parrot*. He had worked on it for years and said that it was much more complex than any of his boxing paintings, which of all his work had received the most acclaim. Nan couldn't wait to see it.

She first knew of George as an artist, then as her teacher and then as her friend. When she still lived in New York City, she went to the Art Students League on Fifty Seventh Street. She had intended on signing up for his class. But George's classes in the City were always full. So she started taking art classes with George when she and Wilna moved to Bearsville near the town of Woodstock in the Catskills where he taught in the summer. He was taking on new students and as it turned out he liked her work. She couldn't believe her luck!

She knew of his work from her days in the City. She had gone to a group show of the Ash Can artists at a gallery in the Village. There, she had fallen in love with his *Cliff Dwellers*. She was enthralled by the large painting of overcrowded Lower East Side tenements with a street between them. A huddled mass of people filled the bottom of the canvass. Children played on the pavement in the foreground. Wearing white, their mothers bent over them. The mothers were young women harried beyond their years with too many children and even more worries. Four clotheslines were strung above the crowd between the tenement fire escapes. The thickly slanted brushstrokes brought the scene to life. On the left hand side of the canvass, a

black man wearing a brimmed hat tipped his head forward. On the right, a white man sat on the railing next to a set of stairs that led from the tenement into the crowded street.

The people looked as if they had spilled out of the tenements and into the street between them. There were other figures on the stairs. Heads protruded from open windows. A woman stood on a fire escape as she reached out to hang laundry.

At first, Nan barely noticed the trolley in the background. Then she looked closer. Tiny faces stared out of the trolley's square windows. A tenement rose behind the trolley. Miniature people sat on crowded fire escapes, looking down.

She remembered the small patch of light at the top of the painting. At first she thought it was the sky. But when she looked closer, she saw that white smoke had swirled up from the chimney of a lower building in front of a skyscraper. The people who lived in the tenements were walled into their surroundings. This fact had resonated with a pang in her stomach. Her father had made sure that she always had what she needed. They weren't wealthy but she had enough. While she had been living her life, others were living in overcrowded, disease ridden circumstances. She had heard of this before. When she lived in the city, she would often stand at the back of the crowd listening to stump speeches given by socialists. Their words were somehow remote. The painting suddenly made everything real.

When she read the plaque on the gallery wall next to the painting, Nan learned that nearly two-thirds of the population of New York City lived in tenement housing by 1900. This was when the more affluent people who lived in the Lower East side began to move further north. The immigrants -- many fleeing famines and wars -- moved into the single-family dwellings that had been converted into multiple apartment tenements or into new housing that had been constructed as tenements.

The painting made her feel more deeply. It made her want to learn more. Nan longed to be this kind of painter. She wanted to confront society and make them see things they were afraid to look at in real life. She wanted to be the kind of painter who challenged herself. And she did. She saw things so keenly that she had to paint -- even if it was a river and not a tenement. When an image crystallized in front of her, when it was so beautiful that it was painful, she knew that she had to paint it.

She painted one of her first oils under George's tutelage when she took a class with him in Woodstock. She titled it, *Along the Hudson: River Landscape*. Tall wintry trees on the banks of the river framed the sides of

the painting. The blue grey Hudson swirled behind them. In the river, a window-shaped square of yellow light brightened a tiny tug boat. Puffs of whitish grey trailed from its smokestack. It was dusk. The patch of yellow light reflected in the murky river. Art imitated life. Nan had painted a wide white swath down the middle of the river. The thickness of the oil paint gave the canvass texture. The white streak that she made with the paint brush looked like the patch of floating ice that it was.