

# up front

I am standing on the sidewalk, looking up on a watery October morning, as four of my father's largest sculptures are lifted by a monstrous crane from the roof of the five-story building in downtown Manhattan where he has worked and sometimes lived for the past 30 years. The pieces are huge. *Monumental*, they call them. Stainless steel, abstract, ungainly, and dramatic. My father had them craned up roughly three decades ago after outdoor showings in Battery Park and Tribeca, during a very different time in New York City. When, for example, Mayor Koch was all about supporting public art. When this neighborhood belonged to the artists—their pace, their bars, their funky studios, and most important, their art. And when, in the case of my father, the Buildings Department turned a blind eye if artists needed, or wanted, to move their art “home” to SoHo. All has changed, however, and the Buildings Department (armed with new codes and regulators under Mayor Bloomberg) has sent my father a big, fat notice threatening substantial retroactive fines if, among other things, the “unpermitted and precarious roof accessories” (as they were described to me over the phone) are not immediately removed.

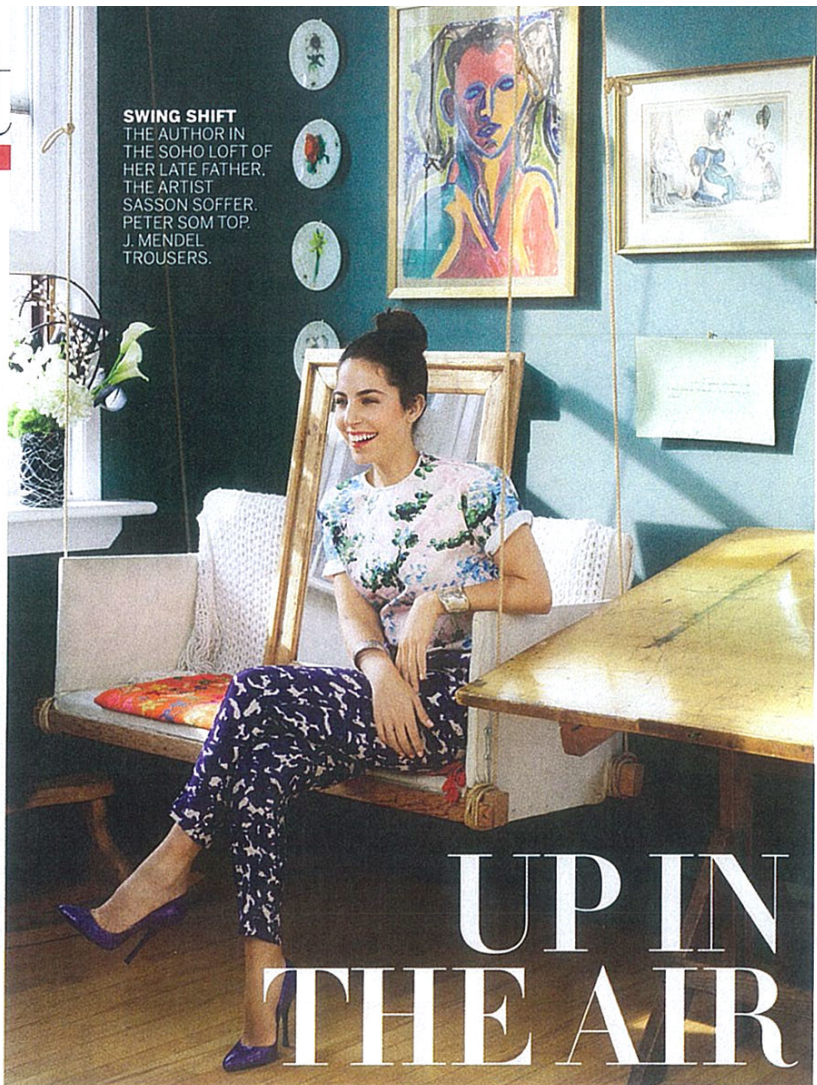
So here we are.

Or here I am. My boyfriend, too. But not my father, who is 80 blocks north in the apartment he shares with my mother, the apartment where I grew up. He is in a hospital bed with a warm sheet pulled up to his chin, clean-smelling pillows all around his face. He has had cancer for years, and a recent stroke has made it all suddenly worse—the symptoms amorphous, my father a different version of himself. Almost gone. He has not said a word in weeks. He does not stir when I enter the room.

When the notice came, I wanted to tell him, needed to know what he would do about this. I had a feeling he'd tell the Buildings Department to screw off—and that the burden of the task would be passed along, as everything logistical always was, to my mother. But I didn't—couldn't—ask, and I would never know how he would have handled it. My father no longer even blinks.

And my mother was busy taking care of him, so the responsibility of moving the sculptures was passed along to me. My boyfriend and I figure out this operation together, piecemeal. First, trying to fight the violation and losing, then researching and, finding no way around it, obtaining permits, closing down the street, hiring a crane company, culling my father's tiny, scrawly address book for those contacts that might be useful—but everyone we call suggests “winging it.” Such are the kinds of contacts my father has in his book. Still, here now is the Polish ironworker who has done business with my

**SWING SHIFT**  
THE AUTHOR IN  
THE SOHO LOFT OF  
HER LATE FATHER.  
THE ARTIST  
SASSON SOFFER.  
PETER SOM TOP.  
J. MENDEL  
TROUSERS.



## UP IN THE AIR

Forced to remove her ailing father's sculptures from a New York City rooftop, Jessica Soffer rented a crane, closed down a street—and got in way over her head.

father for years. We have hired him as foreman. Here, too, are the crane operator and his crew whom we found through my father's steel fabricators in New Jersey. And here are the ironworker's friends; we've hired them to put the sculptures onto a flatbed truck and drive them to eastern Long Island, where the pieces will go to live for a while, until we can find them a more permanent home. They will be just miles from a public park in East Hampton dedicated to my father's work, but they cannot go there yet, if ever, as the park is town-owned and approved for only the sculptures that already populate the space.

My mother calls, asking if we've hired a police escort, recounting other instances of moving my father's art and needing one, and I pretend—because it's a little late in the process—that I can't hear her.

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SIMON BURSTALL; FASHION EDITOR: KATHRYN NEALE; HAIR: ANDRE GUNN; MAKEUP: ANGIE PARKER; DETAILS: SEE IN THIS ISSUE.



It takes 30 minutes to harness the first piece. It's called *Immigrant* and is hard-edged and geometric, all doglegs from a bird's-eye view. It is craned into the air. I hold my breath. It begins to descend, slowly slowly slowly, sometimes so slowly that I cannot be sure if the crane is actually moving it and not just dangling it in the air as if taunting an open mouth below. But down it comes, and after about fifteen minutes it teeters just above the ground and then lists sideways onto the sidewalk, like a very sick and wearied horse.

People have begun to line up. Some know my father as the holdout, an anomaly, a fixture in gesso-stained jeans and a black wool cap in this now-upscale neighborhood. Some know him for his mentorship by Mark Rothko and for his work (in the Whitney's permanent collection, for example, and shown at MoMA and the Boston MFA). Some are tweeting about him. Some are tweeting about art. Some are tourists, unsure of what they're witnessing but photographing in earnest, eager for a New York City memory that will stick. Some have just gotten out of the Holland Tunnel and are annoyed about the redirection of traffic. Some come. Some go. And as half a dozen strong men hoist the piece from the ground to the flatbed truck, *Immigrant*'s mirror image, *Migrant*, begins its descent.

My father used all his money to buy this building in 1976. It was a sight to behold, my mother says. No heat. No sinks. No locks. Used needles, abandoned mattresses, the acrid smell of burning rubber all day every day from the doll factory next door. And in the alley between here and there: doll heads, roll-

Things have gone smoothly, I think to myself as they are harnessing the second-to-last piece. Then, everything stops

ing around in dark water. It's hard to imagine all that, given the looks of things now. In the retail space on the first floor, you can buy a giant green *S* for \$850. Across the street, you can spend \$30,000 on a mattress.

Six months before the mailman delivered our first notice from the city, I moved (with my boyfriend) into the loft below my father's studio. He was sick then, his cancer already metastasizing in his bones too quickly for the medicine to keep up, and he rarely made the trip downtown to work in his studio or to see us. To repay him for the enormous gift of letting us stay, and in a fit of loving optimism, my boyfriend remodeled the studio for him—transformed it from the cavernous artist's den with bathroom fixtures held down by glue, masses of wires exploding from the walls, and the little objects my father used in his creative process (tacks, nails, hammers, scissors) strewn into a nasty obstacle course on the floor—into something livable, clean, and wheelchair accessible. He repainted the walls. Rehung the artwork. Organized. Added a shower and an extra-wide door frame and a new couch that wouldn't require a backhoe to get in and out of. During my childhood, my father often slept here—and my mother and I often joined him. My boyfriend and I wondered if that

might happen again. We hoped for it—that being in his space all day every day might spur some remaining bit of energy, might keep him working, excited. We would never know. He saw the renovated place only twice. He loved it. He kissed my boyfriend's face again and again. But one night just before the remodel was finished, he had a bad fall, which left him even less mobile than before and aggravated the effects of the stroke. So he never showered or ate dinner or painted there. He never stayed over, and that was that.

After *Migrant* is *East Gate/West Gate*: two sculptures nestled together, rings inside of rings inside of rings. My father was deeply connected to all of his work, but these, I happen to know—though they were built twelve years before I was born—have particular significance. They were among his first large-scale sculptures. Before them, he'd been mostly a painter. He was represented by the dealer Betty Parsons at the time, and when he told her his plan to leave New York and move to Maine for months to work with the fabricators there, she said he was out of his mind to launch an endeavor of that scale with no promises of purchase or placement. She told him he'd better stick to painting. He didn't listen. He slaved over these two. First, in his head: brainstorming their shape, personality, relevance, the unique ways in which they might catch the light. Then, in his studio: building tiny wire representations of his vision, all hope and wobbly promise. Next, in the field: spending nearly a year, as it turned out, in rural Maine as the whole thing came together. And this is how it went for him for decades. From one sculpture to the next. On one occasion, he worked in Cuba. On another occasion, China. If his pieces weren't commissions, it might take years to find homes for them—to part with them, yes, but also to persuade a university, museum, or public arts director to house a sculpture of that size. *East Gate/West Gate* was displayed in Battery Park before he moved it home to SoHo. He said he felt quite lucky, having it and the others just above his head. He once told me that he hoped they'd remain on the roof forever, permanently punctuating the ever-changing skyline of lower Manhattan—if you knew where to look. If you were lucky enough to know where to look.

Things have gone smoothly, I think to myself as they are harnessing *East Gate*, the second-to-last piece to come down. All our planning, I think, has paid off. I exhale. I sit down on a stoop.

But then, everything stops. All the men who had been on the roof are suddenly on the sidewalk in a circle. The crane operator has joined them. The ironworker is looking at the ground. And then he is looking at me. I stand up.

"We have to cut them," he says, walking toward me. "They're too big."

"Too big for what?" I say.

"Everything," he says.

I sit back down. My boyfriend takes over. He is in the thick of it, negotiating with the ironworker, the crane operator, and his crew. When he comes back, he explains that harnessing a piece this size and of this shape is dangerous—to the piece and to the buildings around it.

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## ARTISTIC LEGACY

"Shouldn't we have known about this?" I say to him and stare down the ironworker, who still isn't making eye contact. When I look at his crew, they won't look at me either. I realize that hindsight is beside the point. I realize how very much I am over my head. And I feel a sudden responsibility for something I am not ready to handle. Like someone has abandoned her baby at my feet.

"I can't," I say, not thinking. "I can't."

My boyfriend puts his hand on my arm. The ironworker comes over for my answer. It is the first time he looks me in the eye.

"Who will put them back together?" I manage to ask. He waves his hands in front of his face as if I've accused him of something. The logistics of how exactly all this will happen without my father's oversight is lost on me. What is not lost on me is that he will not know. I will tell him and he will still not know. He will never see any of his sculptures again, never mind these.

"One step at a time," my boyfriend says.

I feel like I am going to pass out.

Except, one doesn't get excused from moments like these. So I stand, like everyone else, listening to the frightening, hungry guzzle of a saw, and then watch the jagged, ungraceful pieces of *East Gate/West Gate* come down. The men, I think, are getting tired, and maybe a bit sloppy, though I'm not sure. They are smoking as they work, their cigarettes held between their teeth. They are laughing, too. Everything suddenly looks unprofessional, and I feel completely to blame. I watch the pieces get stacked onto the flatbed truck. And I watch them get tied with ropes. And when the men go across the street for coffee before their drive out, they leave the sculptures to sit and wait. I race to them and try to shift the ropes, to put a pair of my socks beneath one particularly exposed corner for padding. But I can't make them budge. The sculptures are too big.

My father will die seven days later.

Soon after, for financial and other reasons, my boyfriend and I move upstairs, into the fifth-floor loft. See the sculptures, copper Möbius strips and shaped neon tubes once displayed along Walker Street, now hanging from the ceiling on metal hooks. See my father's paint-splattered drafting desk, its daubs and dollops preserved in varnish. See the pressure cooker with its worn handle. See the paintings. See the grab bar, the chair in the shower stall. See the chalky photo of his father in Baghdad—a man who died 50-some years before I was born. See the charred mixing spoons, the endless sets of unmatched silverware. See his socks. Mismatched, too. I keep them in my drawer.

It is a gift to live where we do: The loft is double the size of the apartment where I grew up on the Upper West Side, has huge old windows, high ceilings, and is located on a border block of SoHo that is just the right mix of quiet, touristy, and authentic New York. We manage the building, which is more work than I ever imagined (I know more than most about toilets, peat, rent rolls, the landmarks department, and what can and cannot be recycled in Manhattan and how and when).



**MAJOR DAD**  
ABOVE: SOFFER'S  
SCULPTURES,  
BEFORE REMOVAL.  
LEFT: JESSICA,  
AGE THREE, WITH  
HER FATHER.

Down here, we feel like part of something. My father was friendly with the owner of the weapon-fabrication shop that has replaced the doll factory next door. And because of that, the workers there keep an eye on us. I bring them chocolate cupcakes in return. There is a restaurant on West Broadway with the cornmeal pancakes my father used to bribe me with so I would sleep downtown on weekends. And though they don't have the same pancake recipe, they know my voice, my delivery order by heart when I call. I smile at the handful of men, slow walkers, about my father's age, artists surely, who stick out like sore thumbs in the area now. I convince myself that they met me in my father's studio when I was a kid, and that somehow, they remember.

There are days, still, when I miss my father acutely—when it feels like the sadness is a hurricane brewing inside of me all the time, the tears always one too-sudden move from bubbling up and spilling out. There are times when it's different: when it occurs to me, dawns on me, that he's gone and that I have, at least for a little while, allowed the immediacy of that feeling to lie still, go dormant. There are days when I go to the roof of this building, looking for answers, for a tangible sign from him (weather or noise or a lone silver coin skidding toward my feet) that he's not as far away as he feels. But so far, there's been no sudden storm, no bellow of opera music. And even if there were, would that really comfort me? Would it be enough? Of course not. What is enough, however, is brick and mortar. Stone and steel. This building. I am standing on the roof. His roof.

And, of course, there are *Immigrant, Migrant*, and *East Gate/West Gate*—the last still in pieces—which live on a lovely, woodsy spit of land in front of my mother's house on eastern Long Island. Sometimes she says that she's afraid someone might steal them.

I tell her, smiling, to let them even try. □