No Neck Brace For Me

They dangle on nooses, meant for me and those like me. They have neck braces that keep them from hanging themselves as they climb and swing around the outside of my building. There is no neck brace for me.

They will drag me out and hang me as soon as they find me, as soon as they discover I haven’t left. It’s a small apartment, poorly rehabbed and converted from commercial to residential use. I know that the men who will be grabbing for me are small and uniformly dark-haired. I might be able to hold off one or two of them, but there are so many climbing around on the fire escape and on the scaffolding they’ve put up. They are searching these buildings wearing their neck braces.

The small men have ropes with adhesive glue pads on one end. They use these and all of their large inventory of hooks and rake-like tools to gnash at us as we try to flatten out to hide in the far corners and crevices of our apartments.

When there was furniture here, it was easier. We could hold onto it as we hid from those who would snatch at us, who tried to come in through the windows to attach themselves to us, to pry us out like a rotten tooth. They try to come through the apartment doors as well as grasping at us from the windows.

That is why the government men have taken away our beds, our couches, our plump, sitting chairs and the love seat, too. When we had furniture in the apartment, we had at least a fighting chance. We had big, solid objects to hold onto, to keep from being pulled out the windows or the front door, but now there is very little to cling to when they try to hook and grab us. That is why there are only a few of us left in the building.

I used to hear noises in the apartment above me, but there was lot of crashing, and pulling noises and shouting up there last Saturday night. Since then I’ve heard nothing.

There are very few of us that haven’t been sucked out of our windows or pulled out the front door, fingernails screeching on the windowsills or the door frame. We don’t know whether to be glad or not that we only have front doors. If we had back doors, we might be able to escape through them, but that would also be another entry point for them to snatch at us, to glom onto us, to haul us out to the nooses that hang down from the scaffolding.

They move among the scaffolding using a system of ropes and pulleys connected to the nooses. When they wear the neck braces, they can use the ropes like a series of trapezes. They are the aerialists of our doom.

We have them coming in through the windows and the doors. And there is nowhere to hide. Run? Run where? We can’t get to any open space. There isn’t any open space. That’s what is behind all this. They want to empty the buildings so they can build their hives, their so-called newly arrived workers’ cells, where our apartment buildings are.
It started with the sucky high-rises on Broadway, where the Chinese lived. The Chinese were easy to take away, they hardly resisted at all when the adhesive gooey ball devices were deployed against them. They were the first wave of victims. Now, west of West Broadway, our enemies have pretty much given up using the gooey ball catchers to pull people out.

Here, and we’re two blocks west of West Broadway, they’ve had to use hoes, hooks and industrial strength blocks of stickum to get people out. But you have to hand it to them, no matter how hard the strongest of us resist, sooner or later they manage to extract us from our apartments.

They say they’ll replace the furniture and they will, but not until the current residents have been hung from the scaffolding.

I held them off the first time they tried to extract me. But all they had that time was the gooey balls with the Velcro that was meant to cling to my skin, my clothes, my hair. I beat them back that time. But I had furniture to hide behind, to cling to.

They don’t give up easily. If they did, they would still be living in Alaska or Tierra del Fuego, that is, on the extremities of the Americas. Instead they had the gumption to press on to the waist of the continent where they gathered strength for centuries before attacking us on this island and in other places like California that are also west of West Broadway.

And it doesn’t matter if it’s a little way west or way west, they are determined to extract us from our apartments and if they can’t accomplish this with their gooey balls, they will be back with harder and scarier tools. Just because what worked on the east side, east of Broadway, wasn’t working on the west side of the island, didn’t mean they would quit and let us live in peace. They don’t have the word ‘quit’ in their language. (Fine, I’m sure there’s a word for ‘quit’ in Spanish, but not in those Indian languages they’re always speaking to each other in on the scaffolding and to the Mexican ladies who come with the government men into our apartments to do the cleaning and take away the furniture.)

It’s quiet here on the north side of the building. They are busy clambering over the west facade, they’re trying to get a foothold, a stable point to which they can anchor their equipment so they can start extracting residents from those apartments.

Sometimes I see my friend Mick looking out from his apartment building diagonally across the intersection of Hudson and Leonard streets. He is on the 12th floor of a 15-story building. I’m on the sixth floor of an eight-story building.

We are among the few surviving inhabitants of our buildings. He’s on the south side of his building, which is further west of West Broadway, than even my building. We shut up the garbage chutes long ago, but sometimes they break through and use them to attack us.
Mick and I are among the few surviving inhabitants of our respective buildings. Our schedules are not the same, but at what used to be dinner time, before that world disappeared, before the towers fell, we usually try to look for each other, to wave, to give each other some idiotic thumps-up gesture.

Of course, this only happens when they are not swarming on either of our outer walls. We used to be afraid that even when they weren’t on our external walls, if we stuck our heads out of the windows and waved to each other, it might attract their attention and lead to renewed attacks on our facades, on our apartments.

We tested whether they were watching us carefully at first. Eventually, we determined that it was safe to communicate by sign language even though we’re still too nervous to let our sessions last longer than two or three minutes.

The scariest thing is when he disappears for a few days when they have been swarming on his side of his building. I assume they have sucked him out.

After thinking that for a few times and joyously greeting him when he did show his head, I’ve become hardened to his eventual disappearance. So when it does happen, it won’t be such a big deal.

They did take some of the other neighbors out, the neighbors who were wealthy and well-known. Celebs are among the easiest to pull out even if they still have furniture. I wasn’t surprised by how willingly these former inhabitants of my building and other nearby buildings started to cooperate with the small men.

Now Mick is gone, at least I think he is. I haven’t seen him for a few days. It’s only a matter of time for all of us, all of us west of West Broadway. They’ll extract us, even the most obdurate, even those who have managed to avoid getting their furniture taken away by the government men.

And then it’s a hanging from the makeshift gallows on the scaffolding outside our apartments. There are no neck braces for me, for Mick, for the others. Thank God, I’ve had no success in my career because, like I said, the celebs, even just the wealthy, and there is no shortage of them here, west of West Broadway, are the easiest to siphon out of their apartments. It remains to us, the loners, the embittered, the losers, the addicts and the drunks, the cranks and the crackpots, we who need haircuts and wear second-hand jeans, to keep fighting what we know is a futile battle, all the more so now that most of us have lost our furniture. But that is who we are, and that is why we fight so hard for these tiny, poorly rehabbed cubicles. We fight against the small men, against the onslaught of these maggots who would wrench us out and devour us. They have pushed this far west of West Broadway, soon they will hang us by their rosaries, one of their words for the necklaces.

I know what it will be like when they hang me. It will be like this:
“My God, I am coming to you now. The glittering rosaries hang on the sides of this poorly rehabbed apartment building. How beautiful the strands of beads are. How they shine now. What bliss to wear them around my neck. Look, the small men are motioning that I should accept one of these shimmering necklaces as a gift. They must be encrusted with a fortune’s worth of jewels. These natives have no concept of their value.

I’m beaming as they fit the necklace down around my throat. Now that I’m close I can see that it’s a necklace, not a rosary, but I’m sure the small men have taken care to have it blessed.

I have to believe in their triumph. I will come out of these humble windows that oddly slide sideways. This is the port from which I will leave for the New World – as soon as I put on this beautiful, glowing necklace that these holy innocents are pressing on me.

This is how they will help me ascend into heaven with little use for the empty apartment I leave behind. Like my body I won’t need it, here in the westernmost buildings, west of West Broadway.

I have become one with the sunshine as I’m swept away and led in glorious bliss past the windowsills. Now, I’m out above the scalloped lines of scaffolding on the outside. I see it’s a grid made by the glowing, dangling nooses hanging up and down and the horizontal rows of supports and boards that line the exterior of this poorly rehabbed, west of West Broadway, building.

This is where they are leading me now that they have fashioned the jeweled necklace around my throat.

Going through the window with the beautiful necklace, blue like our Lady’s color, is like being on a boat that is crossing from a small, backward, island nation, nearly devoid of light and heat, but for the softly-banked peat fires. There is no furniture left to burn in that place. I am crossing to the worldly country where the African immigrants sluice the water through the gutters with green, plastic brooms. I go now, bounding across the transom, to embrace the holders of the green plastic brooms, shining nearly as brightly as the necklace that the small men have been kind enough to place around my neck. Now they are gently tugging me through the window to enter the other world. The world where they speak the new language, used for centuries in our oldest and most solemn rites. I’m leaving behind the poorly rehabbed apartment, nearly a jail cell, far west of West Broadway.

Sure, I fought them. I fought letting them put the necklace around my throat. But my resistance was futile.

Now my blood is joined with the blood of the other martyrs that has dried to red dust in the windowsills of this nearly empty, poorly rehabbed building west of West Broadway. Now I am hanging from the scaffolding as my handlers hurry my Ascension Day along with their knives. The necklace has become a noose. The blood is jutting out of me in
spasms. There is no neck brace for me.”

Brent Shearer is a freelance writer who lives on the Lower West Side.