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Jennifer and Chris Gandin Le are more or less homeless—crashing at a friend's place—while they make \$100,000 a year.

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out of New York

AS RENTS GO UP, EVEN CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS ON SIX FIGURES ARE BEING SQUEEZED OUT OF THE CITY.
BY KATE TORGOVNICK

No matter what, at least Ramikolai the goldfish always has a home.



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Chris and Jennifer Gandin Le never expected to be homeless. The 29-year-old newlyweds had a one-bedroom in Fort Greene, in Brooklyn, where they lived with their dog, Mister; canary, Merrell; and goldfish, Ramikolai. Both of their careers were going strong—Jennifer had been commissioned by Francis Ford Coppola to co-write the screenplay for *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* and Chris was doing well as a public health advocate with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Their combined income is just under \$100,000 a year—miles away from the poverty line.

So when they received a letter from their landlords this past July saying that their rent was going up by 19 percent, they didn't panic. They assumed that they'd be able to work out a deal or find a similar apartment nearby. Three weeks later, Jennifer and Chris were cramming their belongings into a storage unit. They spent a month and a half couch-surfing, finally landing in a friend's spare room, where they sleep on an AeroBed mattress on the floor.

"It's chaos," says Jennifer. "I never imagined getting ejected like this."

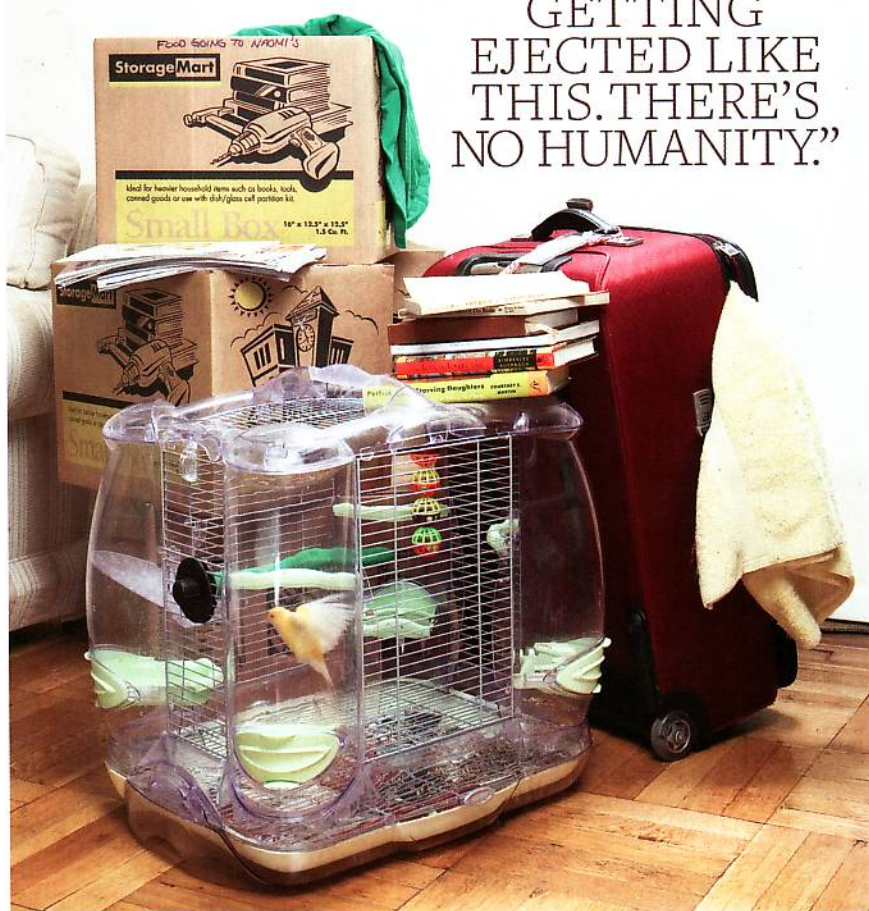
The rental market is tight, with vacancy rates in New York at a shocking low—in Manhattan, just 1 percent—giving landlords the advantage in pricing apartments. Owners' costs are also increasing: This year real estate taxes went up, on average, by 5.8 percent, utilities costs rose by 6.3 percent and labor costs jumped by 8.1 percent. These combined factors are leading to rent renewals as steep as 15 to 25 percent for apartments throughout the city. The rent hikes have hit many people hard, especially low-wage workers, immigrants and the elderly. But the increases are also affecting a group that, on paper at least, shouldn't be struggling: New York's professional creative class.

For Jennifer and Chris, the problem

began on July 13. They had just returned from her grandfather's funeral in Texas when they found a letter from their landlords, M of M Inc., notifying them that their rent was ballooning from \$1,425 to \$1,700 starting August 1. (Company owners Ray and Bobby Singh did not return calls for this article.) The price hike shouldn't seem astronomical for a couple with their combined paychecks, but it was, in fact, nearly impossible due to their hefty student loan payments. (Between them, Jennifer and Chris owe some \$50,000, plus \$5,000 in credit card debt.)

Jennifer left a message with the Singhs' assistant on their voicemail every day. She was hopeful even as Chris was getting angry. "When we rented the place, they said they didn't like turnover," he explains. "But the apartment was crap. There were mice and holes in the wall. The lights in the

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hall would be out for weeks and we'd be forced to go downstairs in the dark. It was awful, but right now \$1,700 is a lot of money for us."

In New York, 2 percent of apartments are rent-controlled (translation: the tenant has lived there continuously since 1971, and their rent remains stable—and often far below market price). Fifty percent are rent-stabilized, meaning that the rent can only be increased by the amount prescribed by the New York City Rent Guidelines Board (this year, 3 percent for a one-year lease and 5.75 percent for a two-year lease). So while many residents are insulated from steep increases, it tends to be people under the age of 40 who move most frequently and who live in free-market apartments where owners can dictate the price.

According to Gary Malin, chief operating officer of Citi Habitats, it's the

market, not necessarily landlord greed, that is driving increases. "In 2006, the market took a turn for the better for owners. Many apartments had been underpriced," he explains. "Now, they're saying, 'This tenant is paying less than what I rented the apartment above him for. I'm leaving money on the table.'"

That's what happened to Betsy Devine, a 30-year-old cheesemaker who lived in a four-bedroom duplex near Ave. C. "It was one of those places built with the intent of renting it to 20-somethings. It was nice, but it felt like a dorm," she says. When she moved there in 2001, she and three roommates paid \$750 each. By 2005, the rent was a still relatively low \$900 per person.

Then in May 2006, the roommates got a notice that the landlord wanted \$4,800, or \$1,200 per person—a 33 percent increase. "It was unaffordable," says Betsy, who lucked out in finding a roomy apartment in a Boerum Hill brownstone, where she and a roommate currently pay \$900 each.

Jennifer and Chris were hopeful this wouldn't happen to them. But after more than a week of being unable to get in touch with the Singhs, they started looking for other apartments. They were discouraged by what they saw. The one-bedrooms in Fort Greene with enough space for them to have home offices were in the \$2,100-and-up range, far above their limit. And the places they could afford were in neighborhoods they didn't like as much.

"Our friends have a similar story—they have a 2-year-old and are pregnant, and their landlords gave them a 30-day notice on a place they'd been living in for eight years. There's basically no humanity," says Chris. "We realized that the New York we were living in wasn't the New York we wanted to be living in."

A week before their August 1 deadline, Jennifer finally reached Roy Singh on a number he'd given for emergencies. He told her to call him on Friday. When she did, on July 27, there was no answer,

so the couple sent a registered letter notifying the owners that they were leaving the apartment on August 1.

They stayed for a few days at the West Village apartment of their writing mentor—but her son was allergic to Mister, the dog. Next, a friend put them up for a week in her 250-square-foot studio on the Upper East Side. "It's only by the grace of our friends that we aren't living out of a U-Haul," Jennifer says.

Then some friends offered Chris and Jennifer their extra bedroom for a month. The apartment now resembles a sitcom set: two guys (one an associate producer for *The Daily Show*, the other in advertising), Jennifer, Chris, Mister, the fish and the canary. Chris and Jennifer are very conscious of the fact that they are guests. "If I use a dish, I wash it immediately," says Jennifer. "We offered to pay rent, but they wouldn't take it," says Chris. "We bought them an Xbox as a thank-you." They stay out of their hosts' way in the morning, waiting until both have left for work before making a move toward the bathroom. Still, they are happy in their room, where stacked boxes serve as shelves for toiletries and books. The walls of the room remain bare, since they wanted to think of it as a temporary home. Shortly, a moving truck will whisk Chris and Jennifer off to Austin.

"We decided to move to Texas—where our families are," says Chris.

As creative professionals, it's a catch-22—they're priced out of New York, but leaving could damage their careers. "Austin has a small, friendly film community," Jennifer says. "But I have moments where I panic that every contact I've made in New York is going to forget about me."

Gary Malin, who works with landlords on a regular basis, has advice for people who find themselves in a position like Chris and Jennifer's. "If you've developed a good rapport, most owners won't want you to walk out the door. Lay your cards on the table. Tell them, 'I pay my rent on time, you've never had a problem with me, and I want to stay here but the increase is a little steep,'" he suggests. "Do your

HOME CHEAP HOME

GREAT, LOW-PRICED APARTMENTS IN NYC AREN'T URBAN LEGENDS.

All things considered, the New York City Rent Guidelines Board's most recent rent averages (from 2005) for one-bedroom apartments look pretty good: \$706 in the Bronx, \$900 in Brooklyn, \$950 in Queens, \$800 in Staten Island and \$1,750 in Manhattan. Yet real estate brokers scoff at these dated numbers. However, there are deals to be found—if you're ready to compromise on how close you need to be to the bright lights of the big city.

In Manhattan, try 157th St. to 181st St. on the far West Side, for beautiful, gut-renovated apartments that average \$1,200 to \$1,400 a month. "This is the next big place," predicts Santiago Steele of Citi Habitats, "because it has transportation and shopping."

With brick row houses and a melting pot of cultures (from Albanian to Mexican to Irish), Sunnyside, Queens, is the new Astoria—with one-bedrooms at about \$1,300 a month.

In Brooklyn's Ditmas Park, a 30-minute subway ride from Midtown on the express, you'll pay \$1,100 to \$1,300 a month, Santiago says. And you're likely to find a place in a swank Victorian home. —Jennifer Cook

homework, see other places. Understanding the market will help you."

Take inspiration from David Wentworth, a 34-year-old photographer who lives in a one-bedroom on the Upper West Side. When he was notified of a 20 percent rent hike, from \$2,500 to \$3,100, David called his landlord to discuss it. He was told to send a proposal.

"I looked online at comparable apartments in my neighborhood. I printed out 10 places renting for under \$2,500 that were on better blocks, had 24-hour doormen or just had more amenities," he says. "So I counter-offered a rent decrease to \$2,300."

He didn't get it, but he was able to negotiate an increase of 6 percent.

Chris and Jennifer wish they could have been as lucky. "I'm going to miss New York," says Jennifer. "I've been here since I was 19, and in many ways my friends have become my family here. I will always love this city."