

# Ghosts of Manhattan

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Designed by Stephanie Daugherty  
Type set in Decomposing/  
NewBskvll BT

ISBN: 978-0-7643-3073-5

Printed in China

Schiffer Publishing Ltd.  
4880 Lower Valley Road  
Atglen, PA 19310  
Phone: (610) 593-1777;  
Fax: (610) 593-2002  
E-mail: [Info@schifferbooks.com](mailto:Info@schifferbooks.com)

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## Chapter Six

# Ghosts Get the Best Room Rates

## Chelsea Hotel

The first time I stepped into the Chelsea Hotel, the spirit of Bacchus passed through me like sweet wine flowing into



**The Chelsea Hotel.**



a chalice. Pretty dramatic, I know, but so was my entrance. It was 1997, and I had just moved to New York City with a broken arm, though that cast and sling were not keeping me from living life to the fullest.

I knew the legend of those hallowed halls, stale with the struggle of artists who sought refuge there, sometimes trading their work as payment toward the rent. The list of musicians, painters, and writers that partied with the muse while staying in the bohemian epicenter astound. Mark Twain, Dee Dee Ramone, Sarah Bernhardt, Robert Mapplethorpe, Patti Smith, Dylan Thomas, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Robert Lambert, Arthur C. Clarke, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Tennessee Williams, and Edie Sedgwick make up just a few of the masters who graced these halls. And though some of them have passed on, residents of this landmark swear that their ghosts return often for a bit of artistic inspiration.

Built as a co-operative apartment building in 1884, for years the hotel was the tallest building in the city. It stands at 222 West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues. Passing underneath its famous sign, the striped awning waves you past the grand façade into a mix mash of Victorian refinery and modern seediness. A hundred rooms are left open for vacationers and short rentals. Permanent residents occupy the rest. Some of them are dead.

### **Sid and Nancy—A Vicious Story**

The most famous story about the Chelsea involves Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious and his girlfriend, Nancy. Both suffered from years of drug abuse. At times, each turned tricks to support the habit. As a child, doctors diagnosed Nancy as a violent schizophrenic. Sid came from a broken



home. His mother shared drugs with him. It should come as a surprise to no one that the doomed lovers swapped spit and needles within those famous walls.

After setting their first room on fire, they relocated to room 100 for an extended stay. Their time at the Chelsea involved drug deals, knock down drag-out fights, and an attempt to quit heroin that resulted in an addiction to methadone.

At this time, the Chelsea housed numerous addicts who did little more than shoot up whatever was available. Somehow, Sid and Nancy's behavior proved so unpleasant, even the other drug addicts wanted nothing to do with them. On the night of October 12, 1978, Sid thrashed around the hallway, annoying the other residents into calling the front desk to complain. When a black bellhop named Kenny came to investigate, a fistfight broke out because of Sid's racist language. Bloody and bruised, Sid returned to his room sometime later.

Throughout the night, loud moaning permeated from Room 100, scaring a woman in room 102. She said it sounded like, "someone alone." In the early morning, an unidentified caller from outside the hotel called the front desk to say there was trouble in Room 100.

A bellhop named Charles was sent to check it out. A few moments later, a panicked Sid called the front desk, begging for them to send help. Paramedics and police found Nancy stabbed to death on the bathroom floor. Police arrested Sid and he confessed in howling sorrow.

Lots of theories abound about what happened. Some, like Sex Pistols lead singer Johnny Rotten, claim Sid never would have killed Nancy because even though most people could not stand to be around her, he adored her. Whether or not he could have proves hard to determine. Several people drifted



in and out of the room during that dreadful night, including a mentally ill drug dealer named Steve C. All of their dealers and “friends” knew that Nancy carried large amounts of cash because she flashed it around like loose change, yet police never found any of it.

Is it possible that while Sid was roaming the halls or passed out, some unknown person could have come in to rob Nancy? When they could be bothered to raise their arms for something other than a needle, she and Sid often beat each other. And despite her deteriorating condition, she sometimes carried Sid in her arms when he became too wasted to walk, taunting him about his weakness. So if someone had tried to rob her, she probably would have fought to the death if she had been coherent enough to realize it.

Others believe it could have been a suicide pact gone horribly wrong. When questioned by police, Sid kept asserting that he “could not keep up his end of the bargain.”

Out on bail and missing Nancy terribly, he asserted this many times over the following months. On February 2, 1979, a heroin overdose at a party in Greenwich Village ended his speaking days for good. Even this death remains clouded in mystery, as people cannot decide if he took the overdose by accident or to hold up his end of the bargain.

Current opinion holds that the ghosts of Sid and Nancy still make every effort to offend with the same crass antics they used in while alive. A sullen and dirty Sid often appears in the elevator.

Some years ago, a guy I know left his darling Yorkie with three club kids who lived at the hotel. In addition to dying the unfortunate dog’s hair green, they insisted that they ran into Nancy descending the gothic wrought iron staircase with



Sid in her arms. They said that she paused long enough to sneer at them as she made her way down, indicating she would spit on them before fading into the wall. The strong smell of urine and body odor that accompanied this sighting either reveals that their earthly lifestyle still appeals to them, or that the club kids desperately needed to bathe. And though she was buried in her prom dress, that coarse peroxide locks dyed back to their original brown, the ghost of Nancy Spungen chose to appear in her beloved black latex. Sid appeared strung out and vague of mind. I suppose some habits die hard, like the people who practice them.

### **A Room With a View**

According to the fabulous *Legends of the Chelsea* video blog, the late Dee Dee Ramone of The Ramones became distraught when he thought that he was staying in the very room he partied in with Sid and Nancy. The room freaked him out so badly, he insisted on being moved out for fear that his old friends lingered.

He asked the much-loved former manager Stanley Bard why he booked him into that room. But whether or not he actually saw anything remains hotly debated, as Bard divided the space into different rooms after the murder occurred to avoid the morbid fascination and idol worship that would come from keeping it intact. And because it had long since been altered, many believe that Dee Dee might have been influenced by his own chemically-influenced demons, dark shadows, and a sketchy memory of the location.

Nothing consoled Dee Dee, though. He drank coffee all night in a nearby diner while management located him new accommodations.



One thing everyone can agree on is that the day before she died, Nancy bought Sid the five-inch hunting knife that killed her. In those hazy last moments, it must have seemed as if the jaguar carved in to the handle was mauling her to death.

But let us not dwell too much on the spirits of punk rock, for so many ghosts fill that beautiful building, the unwelcome new management company should charge them rent instead of charging residents more money!

### **A Drink To Death**

Imagine drinking eighteen straight whiskies. Now, imagine the state of your liver if eighteen whiskies did not prevent you from announcing that you had drunk them. Poet Dylan Thomas made such a proclamation the night before he slipped into a coma at the Chelsea.

He slept off his bender, waking up to go to another bar with a friend. All day, he complained of breathing difficulties and pain from other ailments. Returning to the Chelsea, his doctor visited him several times to administer unwise doses of medicine to calm his hallucinations and discomfort.

Painter Jack Heliker claims that Thomas uttered his last words at the hotel: "Thirty-nine years, this is all I've done." Soon after, Dylan fell unconscious and was moved to St. Vincent's hospital, where he passed away on November 9, 1953.

Even though he did not die at the hotel, he must think of it as his home away from heaven. He visits the eighth floor often.

### **More Important Ghosts**

And like an angle looking homeward, Thomas Wolfe visits, too. As you may have guessed from that overbearing





allusion, he wrote the famous work at the Chelsea. He checks in every now and again, perhaps upset that he did not die on the premises, either.

Other dramatic apparitions include Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. Both stayed at the Chelsea, and many believe that they continue to inspire the artists who live there. Janis carried on a steamy affair with musician Leonard Cohen, who immortalized their union in the song “Chelsea Hotel No. 2.” Jimi’s experience—and if you are tired of the allusions, I just cannot help myself—includes being mistaken for a bellhop at the height of his fame, an event he viewed as a blistering reminder of the prevalent racism at the time.

New Yorkers hold the Chelsea Hotel close to their heart. It caught mine the first time I saw it. It radiates such amazing energy, even the dead cannot forget it.

## Round Table

At 59 West 44<sup>th</sup> Street, ghostly members of the Round Table still pop in for lunch. The daily ritual lasted for almost all of the 1920s and became internationally known for its standards of wit and intellect. Marc Connelly, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Robert Sherwood, George S. Kaufman, Harold Ross, Heywood Broun, Ruth Hale, Edna Ferber, Harpo Marx, and John Peter Toohey made the Algonquin Hotel famous after an 1919 afternoon roast of another member, *New York Times* critic Alexander Woollcot. Everyone enjoyed the acerbic lunch so much, they decided to make it a standing engagement. Sometimes other notables joined in the merriment, including Noel Coward, Tallulah Bankhead, Lynn Fontanne, and Alfred Lunt. Al Hirschfeld immortalized the Round Table in his famous caricature.



## **The Vicious Circle**

Though they ate at a round table, the group referred to themselves as *The Vicious Circle*. And indeed one needed a strong stomach to swallow the insults that were passed around that table as casually as bread. The sharp banter and witticisms made them a legend. And apparently, the legend lives on.

Dorothy Parker and Harpo Marx make use of the lobby to indulge in deep conversations. Many report seeing a flirtatious Tallulah Bankhead on the elevator. She often winks at surprised guests before vanishing. And though the Rose Room no longer exists, it seems as if it does. The sounds of laughter, loud debates, and glasses clinking can be heard in the dead of night.

As the title of Kaufman's play says, *You Can't Take it With You*. But you can certainly come back for it.