

Nora Kelly / QUEBEC STREET

Overhead, furniture is dragged across the floor. I stand by the window and look out, watching the movers lug a grimy old sofa down the front steps and up the ramp to the van.

I've been living in the building for almost a year. It's an old apartment block that's seen grander days, still hanging on at the edge of a residential zone, just where the green yards give way to parking lots. From my windows I can see three churches, the employment centre, the post office, and a Catholic school. The school is right across the street. Behind the telephone poles and scruffy tree branches and squares of sky reflected in the school windows, I catch glimpses of the students in their classrooms. They swim close to the glass in their green uniforms, then fade into the murky depths. Twin globes, one terrestrial, one celestial, stand together on a windowsill. I can't see the stars, but the blue oceans and familiar continental shapes are distinct and beautiful.

In the evenings, when the students have gone home and the sky darkens beyond the squat silver cupolas of the Ukrainian church, the school is empty and quiet, except for bingo nights and basketball games and dances. On bingo nights, the players come in cars, filling all the parking spaces for blocks around. In the warm weather, they fan themselves beneath the fluorescent lights and open all the classroom windows. The numbers, quavering over the P.A. system, boom hollowly through the night air. I could play, in my apartment, if I had the cards. There's also a bingo hall in the next block. Some of the residents in my building are regulars.

Up the hill, there's the fire hall. The trucks thunder past my windows at all hours, but I've learned to sleep through the sirens. Other noises wake me up—drunks returning late from the Legion, old cars starting and dying on cold mornings, the man who coughs under my windows, the women on the corner cursing their johns. And, until last week, the television upstairs.

Most of the tenants here are used to the racket, or they're deaf. They hardly notice the fire engines or the dance music blaring from the gym.

They've lived here for a long time, longer than I've lived anywhere. Longer than I ever want to live anywhere. The couple who had this apartment before me stayed for forty-nine years. She yelled at him a lot; he smoked on the sly. Like it or not, these things are known. The apartment curls around a light well, one of the hollow, skylit shafts that pierce the building's core. The interior windows of eight apartments on four floors open into each well. One day I burnt the toast and had to shout up the well so people would know there wasn't a fire. If you smoke, everyone on the light well gets a whiff. If you have something private to say, you don't say it in the kitchen or the bathroom.

Back in the fifties, before I was even born, the couple raised a family here in this apartment. It's big, by today's standards—seven hundred square feet, eleven-foot ceilings, two bedrooms. Still, I've heard they had three kids. Everybody did—that was the baby boom we're always hearing about—but how did they stand it? Three kids bouncing off the walls, no back yard, no upstairs to send them to. Last year, the husband died. Emphysema. The children came and cleared the place out, moved the wife somewhere else.

The building is changing now; it's 'in transition.' The old renters are slowly dying off, and the new people are young, like me. The new occupants pay higher rents, but the apartments are still a bargain, unless you can't live without a dishwasher. They're never advertised; you have to hear about the building, track the vacancies, get to know the manager. When the old couple left, I moved in. I'm only twenty-six; I don't plan to die here, but I'm not going to leave for a while. I'm scraping by on student loans; I don't have the money to move upmarket, and most places where the rent is reasonable have major problems. This is paradise compared to my last apartment—two tiny rooms and the guys next door were always drunk. This building has no cockroaches and no drug dealers. Mainly, it has tenants older than my grandmother. They've known each other forever, and they feel safe here. The landlord isn't going to boot them out, or jack up the rent, or let rock bands move in.

When the old tenants go, they sometimes move to the Chapel of Chimes, the funeral home around the corner, lit up in pink and white neon. Now and then I walk to the corner store at night, to buy milk or juice for the morning, and I see fog coming in off the water, swirling around the Chapel of Chimes like pink smoke. The Evangelistic Tabernacle, right next to the chapel, is illuminated too, but its tall, silvery steeple disappears into the upper layers of mist. Miles away, there are mountains. They're often hidden by clouds or smog, but on clear days I can see them from my north window, filling the horizon between the tabernacle and the Baptist church.

The lights of the city turn the clouds strange colours in the evening—sooty orange and mauve. Once, a little after sunset, when it was already quite dark in the street, a big orange cumulus cloud hung right behind the cupolas of the Ukrainian church, and for a moment I thought the church was on fire. At night, the mountains and the sky merge into a flat blackness above the street lights. A single constellation hangs low in the tree branches: the lamps of the ski hill, twinkling like Scorpio.

It's not the end of the month, but everything in the apartment above mine is being carted away. Tables and chairs, a box spring and mattress and a chest of drawers have disappeared into the deep interior of the moving van. Cars pass, and a few pedestrians. The drivers crane their necks as they go by, everyone peers into the back of the van, as if the furniture will reveal a secret. Pedestrians slow down, even stop, for the spectacle. There are museums with rooms full of furniture arranged to show how people lived in the past—the pioneer's cabin, the Victorian kitchen with its spits and copper pans—but most people find them boring. Instead, they are transfixed by the momentary exposure of the sagging, grease-spotted sofa from upstairs.

I stand back from the window, so they won't see me watching. A hornet buzzes against the panes, desiring the light. Outside my apartment door, in the vestibule, the caretaker is hunched against the wall, observing the movers as they toil up and down the stairs. He wears a striped engineering cap pulled tightly over his thin white hair. His arms are folded, the anchor tattoo on his left hand tucked under his right arm. His red-rimmed gaze rolls upwards, following their feet as they climb the cracked stone stairs.

I don't need to see him to know he's there. He keeps an eye on things, watches everyone come and go, knows whose clothes are hanging too long on the lines in the laundry room, whose empty bottles are in the garbage cans. His dim basement realm smells of boiled potatoes. In the summer, strips of flypaper, ancient yellow like the newspapers under the linoleum floors, extend in long tongues from the ceiling. Each week, he floods the floors with disinfectant; the odor of hospitals and jails seeps under my door, into my kitchen.

The caretaker doesn't do repairs. He puts the garbage out, mops the floors and patrols the corridors. He lurks on the steps to the basement, jingling his keys. When snow dusts the sidewalk, he's out at five o'clock in the morning, scraping the metal snow shovel over the concrete a few feet below my bedroom window. He prints misspelled commands in felt pen on pieces of torn cardboard and nails them to the walls of the laundry room. "This means you," he adds, underlining 'you' three times. Once, when a friend of mine came to visit carrying a bottle of wine, he told her she wasn't allowed to bring it into the building. We laughed about that, but it isn't exactly funny to see him prowling the corridors, his mouth working, his eyes bulging with suspicion. He looks like one of the Boyars slinking around the palace in that old Eisenstein movie.

The movers bump down the stairs again and lumber past the windows carrying a cracked headboard. Where will all this junk go, I wonder. Everything is cheap and ugly, worn out and filthy. There won't be much more, apart from the television. A kitchen box with chipped plates and a thin frying pan, and an old valise, probably, stuffed with soiled cardigans and trousers and pairs of heavy leather shoes.

There won't be any records, I know that much. No pictures, no bric-a-brac. I saw the apartment once, when I first moved in. I went upstairs to ask the old man to turn down the volume on the television set. There was nothing on the walls, and if he'd ever listened to music, I would have heard it, the way I heard the TV. The set stayed on all day, so I can guess that there won't be any boxes of books, either. If he'd been a reader, I wouldn't have had the same noise problem. He watched television or looked out of the window. He was staring out the morning I moved in; I saw his face then, through the glass, heavy and

pallid, the flesh sagging off the bones. His mouth gaped open, a dark shadow behind the smeary windowpane.

The apartment he occupied has the same layout as mine. It looks east and north. Only the windows are different. The upper floors have bay windows. Under them, the old metal sheathing has rusted through, and sparrows have found the dry cavities beneath the sills. They build nests there in the spring. For some reason, the old man was annoyed by the birds; he kept trying to drive them out.

"Damn birds, damn birds," he'd say, when they landed on the sill. "Goddam birds!"—his voice cracking.

Incensed, he'd open the casement windows wide and slam them shut, over and over. The glass rattled. I'd see the sparrows swooping and twittering with distress just outside my windows. He frightened them, but they stayed. They outlasted him. I still hear them in the mornings, and I often see them perched on the ragged forsythia bush beneath my northern window, plumping their feathers. A dingy plastic bag, its catch of rain bulging in one corner, has hung there for months. Beside the building, the shaded earth is black and greasy, and slugs leave glittering trails in the weeds. The birds move lightly among the bending branches, wary of cats.

One of the movers shouts from upstairs. He wants help with the television. It's as big as an armchair.

The climate here is gray, and the seasons turn slowly. In winter, the hawthorns that line the street are bare, revealing the clumsy pruning of the city's landscaping crews. Criss-cross wires seine the sky. Now it is spring, and the branches bear clusters of leaves and dusky red blooms, half concealing the ragged wounds in the bark and the unpruned suckers. When the clouds lift, in any season, the morning sun shines directly into my windows. I watch it slide up behind the horizon of roofs. Slatted beams, like golden rulers, pass through the Venetian blinds and fall on the books on the opposite wall. Being unemployed, I can stay in bed and watch the light gilding the spines, travelling slowly from one end of the shelves to the other. One day last month I was listening to the sparrows and the early traffic when the sun suddenly rose from behind a low-lying cloud and struck a shaft into my room, hitting the gilt lettering on Grimm's Fairy Tales. The letters flashed the light back like a mirror.

In the worst part of the winter, I caught a bad cold, maybe the flu. I don't know how to tell the difference. For a week, I stayed in bed all day, reading and sipping mugs of tea, keeping warm under the blankets. It was quieter in the bedroom, I could try to study there. My so-called living room was uninhabitable; directly above it, Mr Todd watched his television. He used to turn it on some mornings as soon as he got up and leave it on for sixteen or seventeen hours, until he went to bed. He had a hearing problem, so he would turn it up all the way. He wouldn't wear a hearing aid, or even put a rug under the set to muffle the vibrations that travelled through the floorboards and the joists and my thin plaster ceiling. Coming home sometimes, I could hear the voices of the news anchors or the game show hosts leaking through the walls into the vestibule, even before I opened the door to my own apartment. Inside, the voices throbbed, loud and unintelligible. The ceiling filtered the words, retaining a sediment of consonants, letting the vowels ooze through. The worst programs were the comedies, with the laugh tracks. I had to close the kitchen window; the yammer echoed maniacally up and down the light well. Some people hear voices in their heads instructing them to kill; they must sound like that incessant bedlam, a noise that can't be shut out. My thoughts were murderous, that's for sure.

Not right away. I'm a reasonable person. When I first moved in, I knocked on his door and talked to him. I was polite; I thought he probably didn't know that the TV was a problem. It was obvious he didn't hear too well, but he heard me all right, and I wasn't shouting. He was so rude it shocked me. He didn't think I had any business asking him to lower the volume—it was his TV in his apartment. I guess nobody had ever complained before. Sometimes people get angry when you talk to them about noise, or their dog dumping on the lawn—whatever—but later they calm down. I let things ride, hoping that if I waited, he'd have second thoughts.

After two weeks, I was going crazy. I went upstairs again. He came to the door, egg yolk glistening on his bristly chin, and he told me he'd lived here for thirty years so he could do what he liked. I tried to explain how loud the noise was downstairs. I offered to buy a little rug and bring it to his apartment, just a mat to put under the TV to muffle the vibrations. He wouldn't listen. He just slammed the door and

clumped back down the hall in his heavy shoes. I wasn't going to get anywhere talking to him. So I complained to the manager, and then to the owner. Nothing changed; he's old and sick, they said. His kidneys don't work. He'll die soon. The manager never did a thing, except collect the rent and play bingo twice a week.

Mr Todd was almost alone. His wife had died eight years before; a sister came once in a while to clean a little. She humored him, hardly listening to what he said. It was always the same, anyway. She would turn the television down while she was there and do the dishes, standing at the kitchen sink with the window open to the light well, saying "That's right," or "What a shame," while the pots banged and the old man shouted at her from the doorway. Every few weeks, he telephoned someone and hollered into the receiver for ten or fifteen minutes. He never went out, except on Sundays, when he laboured asthmatically down the stairs and walked to church, wearing a long, thick gray coat and a hat like the ones businessmen used to wear forty years ago.

A couple of times, one of his knees gave way, buckling suddenly so that he fell down the steps, or collapsed on the sidewalk. The manager told me about this when I paid my rent and made my usual complaint about the noise. I was glad to know; I hoped he'd fall and crack his skull. The first time, I was ashamed of feeling like that. But not the second. By then I'd been in the apartment for six months, and I was way past any shame. I was knotted tight. Waiting.

Often, he would stand in the kitchen and scream abuse at his dead wife.

"Go to hell," he would shrill. "Go to hell and stay there! Shut the door and your mouth, too. Burn in hell forever!"

The hoarse shouts would dwindle into a long, accusatory mumble and then rise again, boiling with temper, until he grew tired. After I talked to him the second time, he started yelling at me, too. From his kitchen, he could squint down the well and observe my bathroom window. If he saw a light behind the wavy glass, a fusillade of curses would burst into the narrow concrete shaft, echoing from wall to wall like gunfire in a canyon, until his fury exhausted him and he broke into strangled coughing.

I took to bathing in the gloomy twilight that seeped through the glass lid above the shaft, and I fled the apartment, even on the days

when I had no classes to attend, walking until my feet were tired, sitting on benches in the park in good weather, or spending whole afternoons in the public library, like the shabby men who went there to keep warm. Coming back home, I would feel my muscles tense. Hostility breathed through the ceiling like the smell of potatoes coming up the stairs. Mr Todd's malignant spirit metastasized, inhabiting the walls, colonising the light well, the air I breathed. It got in everywhere. I could feel him above me, as he sat in his armchair, an inert lump of flesh in a gray food-stained cardigan, his eyes on the *Wheel of Fortune*, the life guttering out of him, nothing left but hating his dead wife, hating the birds, hating me, hating everything, no impulse but the spleen that still prodded his decaying carcase into rasping, spitty utterance.

Silence is something you can buy, if you have enough money. I've never lived in a building that was quiet—the kind with thick, clean carpet in the halls, concrete under the hardwood floors and extra layers of drywall. Economically speaking, Mr Todd was the kind of problem you have when your rent is low, the kind of problem that no one is paid to fix—like the warped window, the nests of frayed electric wire, the furred pipes. Like my wonderful plumbing, which regurgitates the used bathwater from the apartment next door.

I suppose some people will think I should have felt sorry for the old guy. To them I say, you try it. I started out with those feelings, the first time I saw him, but he kept on cranking up the TV and telling me to burn in hell because I'd had the nerve to ask him to turn it down. Sure, he probably forgot my existence half the time, but he wasn't always out of it. There were days when I'd walk up the front steps and see him at the window; I'd unlock my door and walk into my apartment and it would be quiet. Then, a minute later, the TV would go on. He'd seen me come in, and he'd do it just to show me, like it was his last little power trip before God pulled the plug.

I don't sound very nice, do I? I can remember when I was a nicer person, last year. Maybe it's useful to have had some insights into this state of mind—the kind that makes a guy go across the yard with a shotgun and blast his neighbours to smithereens—but, given a choice, I'd have passed. Instead, I got stuck with Mr Todd, and, after a while, when the TV went on, I just wanted the dumb bastard to die so

the TV would go off.

One time, I asked Marge, across the hall, how the old couple who used to live in my place had managed to tolerate him all those years. She just laughed.

"They were hard of hearing, too," she said.

Marge moved out recently, but not to the chapel. She went to a seniors' residence. I wish she were still around. I liked her. She was a kind person, but she had a sort of bite to her, and I could tell that she enjoyed her life. She hadn't been beaten down. Sometimes I think that half the tenants have lost their marbles. Martha, in number twenty-four, goes out every day in good weather and screams at sinners on street corners. Ellie, in nineteen, scours the dumpsters and staggers home with shopping bags full of other people's garbage.

They all have a hard time with the stairs. There's no elevator in the building, and most of the tenants who live on the upper floors stop in the vestibule to catch their breath before shuffling slowly up the flight to the second floor, or two flights to the top, where the water pressure is unreliable and the summer heat blisters the paint. I've carried stuff up for some of them, when they've been shopping. They flock to the supermarket on discount days and struggle back laden with cans of soup on special. Then the vestibule looks like a lobby in one of those nursing homes where they park the residents. It freaks me out. Most of them are nice people; they're OK, not like Mr Todd. Maybe they've had interesting lives. But how do they accept what they've come to? How do they laugh about it? Some of them make jokes. I think they're great when they do that, but I don't want to hear them talking about their bodies. I walk up the front steps, and they'll be going on about bum knees, dicky hearts, arthritis, or so-and-so's cataracts. Marge had a name for these sessions: she called them 'organ recitals.' I say hi and head straight for my apartment. Then sometimes I stare into the bathroom mirror, thinking I'd rather kill myself than be that old. I look at my skin. Skin's nice when it's young, when it's smooth and tight. How do you look at yourself when your skin gets baggy? When everything hurts and you can hardly walk up a flight of stairs? How the hell do you joke about it? I don't want to know.

A few months after I moved in, an old guy, Jerry, was found dead of a stroke on the third floor. I'd seen him a few times; he was thin

and totally bald, and he used to work in one of the salmon canneries. Hard work, standing all day long, chopping heads off fish. He was carried around the corner to the chapel, and then the apartment was painted, and a younger woman rented it. She's pregnant, I've been told. The old ladies are all excited. A baby in the building! When it cries, they'll be too deaf to hear it.

Everybody was sorry about Jerry, including me. But I really wished the grim reaper had harvested Mr Todd instead. I thought about moving out, but finding a good place gets harder all the time, and after I'd been in the apartment for a while, I couldn't give in. I was too angry. The old man wanted to drive me away, but I wasn't going to let it happen. I could wait. I could outlast him. I stayed up late and slept until noon, stealing a few hours of peace after he went to bed. Even then, the television sometimes woke me up early. When it was the first thing I heard, I would feel the world recede, go out of focus; nothing was there except the noise that I couldn't stop. Drawing my knees up to my chest, curled around myself, I lay in the bed with the blinds closed, imagining silence. I waited for him to die.

From time to time, I would open my eyes in the morning and hear no sound from above. I would begin to hope that he had died in bed, that his flesh was already cold on the greasy sheets. Hope would stretch as the minutes ticked by, then snap at the sound of the first footstep. Always, he had overslept.

Then there were evenings when the television stayed on late, past the usual hour of relief at midnight, nights when I would picture him dead in the chair in front of it, slack-mouthed and blind, still staring at the flickering screen. I would think of the noise, of the set staying on all night, roaring and bleating at the corpse. I rehearsed phoning 911: the paramedics would force open the door, the neighbours would stand around the hallways in their bathrobes, whispering. Someone would rouse the manager. An angel of deliverance would march in and turn off the television forever.

I waited, thinking of the colors I would paint the apartment when Mr Todd was dead. I survived on fantasies of death: a fall down the stairs, a slip in the bathtub, some swift organic failure. I didn't have pain in mind, only extinction. "He'll die soon," the manager said. I waited for months. In February, when it was wet and cold, and I was

stuck at home with my flu, I hardly thought about anything except when the old man would cash in his chips. But he lived on until the spring. Until the birds were nesting and the hawthorn trees were in bloom.

And then, at last, he did die. A week ago. I missed the whole thing. I'm taking a French course, and I was very worried about the oral exam. I'm not good at foreign languages; I'm studying French because it's a requirement. I went to the library to look for some tapes. And while I was out, he died. He didn't die in his apartment, though; an ambulance came and took him to the hospital, and he died there, late in the afternoon. The weather being pleasant that day, I was gone until the evening. Then I returned to a heavenly silence. The quiet! It filled the apartment like a fragrance, it lasted all night and went on into the morning, way past the latest hour he had ever slept. I felt the knots in my shoulders and my solar plexus begin to loosen, I had an almost light-headed pleasure in the traffic noise outside, the birds, the man with the spectral cough, the student with the guitar playing "Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore" for the fiftieth time. The stillness above was profound. I waited, not daring to believe it would last, braced for the clumping step, the slam of the window, the clatter of applause as the television burst into life. At eleven o'clock, there was still no noise. Like a soldier wondering why the shelling has stopped, stepping dazedly from hiding, I finally opened the door of my apartment and went to find out the truth. And the truth was that Mr Todd was dead. He'd died the day before, while I was out. The manager smiled when she told me.

"I guess you won't miss him," she said.

Bingo.

It's been quiet all week. Silence blankets the apartment like snow, like Sunday in a God-fearing town. I make my bed each morning, I drink my coffee in the living room, I spend all day in this space which now belongs to me. Today, there is noise from overhead as the movers go about their business: scrapes and thuds, footsteps, the hard, hollow sounds of vacant rooms. But these sounds don't disturb me. The old man lies in the Chapel of Chimes; tomorrow he will roll through the little curtained doorway into the furnace. The apartment above empties like a tub of dirty water.

The movers make the last, lurching trip down the stairs, carrying the television set in its gigantic housing of dark wood. They pass through the vestibule and appear on the sidewalk beneath the window. The television's monstrous eye is closed by a wooden lid. They thrust it into the van and close the doors. An oily cloud of exhaust spews from the tailpipe as they start the engine.

The caretaker, winding a length of string, watches them drive off, then shuffles down the stairs to the basement and opens the door of the incinerator. He feeds junk mail to the flames, piece by piece. I open the window in my living room. The hornet blunders out. I can hear the baby sparrows in their nests under the sills begging to be fed. I open a bottle of wine I've been saving, and pour a glass. I spread my papers on the table and begin to review the lesson on the subjunctive.