

from *Dear Current Occupant*

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Dear Current Occupant—Pink building, Broadway and 12th,

My neighbour was like a girl falling and stuck in the scent of clove and heavy spice. One narrow pink hallway separated our apartments. Her image faded as air between two things, two people, two voices, widened. Every day she asked for things. Things I wouldn't do. She wanted help. She wanted to get better. She said strange things. She knocked on my door when Mama wasn't home. She said things like "Don't forget to take out the trash cans on Tuesday" and "Let the dog out." "You should tell your mother to put apples in your lunch bag." "Your mother has died, but let the dog out." None of it was true. We didn't have a dog. My mother was alive. I always ate apples.

I watched her lock the door behind her. I watched her come home at night, her face tired and her eyes thick-rimmed and black-smudged. Her hair a dry golden halo. I listened for voices. I wondered what she did inside those walls, even though I already knew. But this was her and she was always falling. She reminded me of bread baking. A slow rise, a slight leavening, thick and solid—flavour resting, hovering in the air just above the chin—then sinking. The recipe wasn't right. Whispered those strange things again. Sometimes so soft and smooth-like and then sharp like she hid broken saw blades between her teeth. She changed from opaque to transparent. Like an egg cooking in reverse. Cracking it into a hot skillet, and watching that translucence solidify and change to pure white. Saw her less. Felt her less. Couldn't hear her. I waited in the space just below the tallest of cement buildings closest to this house. Looked up and hoped she would come—

but praying to God that she didn't.

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Dear Current Occupant—Of every yard I didn't have

The part of the soil beneath, held together
by the roots, or a piece of thin material.

Many varieties grown in one location
to best suit the consumer's use, preference, appearance.

It undergoes fertilization, frequent watering, frequent mowing,
and subsequent vacuuming to remove the clippings.

It doesn't need to be washed clean of soil down to the bare roots,
and time to export is shortened. It has been developed

by a method of cultivating. Sprigging where recently harvested,
cut into slender

rows and rows and rows and rows replanted in the field.

the occupants of these suites must adhere to the following rules:

Do not
cause damage to the walls, doors, or windows.

Do not
smoke inside. There will be a charge.

Do not
allow others to reside with you. There will be a charge.

Do not
fail to pay your rent on time. There will be a charge.

Do not
have pets of any kind. This means cats, dogs, and anything that crawls.

Do not
make noise past 11:00 p.m. Consider your neighbours.

Do not
think for a minute that we are not watching you.
Never leave your children alone. We will NOT be held responsible.

damage noted

Small dogs lowered their tails when you walked by. I don't remember having a pet, or anything that crawled. I had two hamsters that bit each other to death and I remember thinking, lucky you. No dogs allowed meant don't let anyone see it walking the halls. I imagined petting the fur. Three girls on the second floor had birds. I watched from my window as the girls poked them with sharpened pencils, and I used to think about the feathers they were losing. I was so glad to be moving. Mama wouldn't bother looking for boxes. No delicates to be packed or to be wrapped—I was careful with my books. No holes in the walls for bookshelves. No graffiti in the lobby in colours that offend. Your rules were endless. But you had no control over the way I made my bed. Thick-quilted patchwork squares tousled just because. Things under my pillow easy for the taking, a safe with no key. One book I've never read: "technicolored complaints aimed at my head."¹

The man upstairs would stare at me the mornings I went to school.

You had no rule for this. My backpack carrying different paths no one could follow. Close behind, linger—jump out wide-armed from bushes. I never carried myself. I used to wish that man would die from overdose, mash up upon my door like mosquitoes. Vancouver. Civilization, people, government. All the city's children are safe? Peeled back the scalps of white Barbie dolls half-eaten, chewed, spat out on the floor. Worrying about the stained carpet still, Mama cleans. She cannot whiten the stain, no matter how hard she tries. Sweep like empty ladles through the lobby of my eyes.²

1 Line from "Moving Out or the End of Cooperative Living" by Audre Lorde.

2 Line from "Moving Out or the End of Cooperative Living" by Audre Lorde.

I broke the rules on purpose

In the basement, all the secrets slept and woke on time every single night. Many people stayed for free on sundecks, balconies, and stairs. I saw them in the fetal, a position we all once held. I asked the people who boarded with us if they had problems too. There were conversations on the couch.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“A chef.”

“Oh yeah, are you a good cook?”

“I’m picky, my mom says.”

This man put his hand on my leg. He left it there for a while.

I stood up.

I crept out of my mother’s house. With nothing in my pockets.