

Transitions

by Jan Nieman

The salesman swings his arm to the left, encouraging us from our natural inclination to shuffle along the path to the right. We're putty in his hands, my husband and I – no hard sell for him this time. He is the authority, we are the uninformed, and the three of us morph into our assigned roles.

“Now this here model has been a popular choice,” he says, exposing his black onyx cufflinks as his smooth puffy hand caresses the leather appointments.

It looks expensive – glittering trim, seamless seams.

My husband brings up the subject of cost. “What does this one run?”

“Ahh,” says Mr. Expert, “the manufacturer has upgraded it for next year, so we can offer quite a saving for you folks.”

If it's so popular, why do they have to upgrade it?

It's hard to concentrate as the associate (identified as such by his bronze, pretentious badge) and my husband discuss details. Their voices float into a bubble behind me as I drift ahead. I don't much care what they decide. A forest green, plush interior catches my attention. It triggers a memory of similar material in the apartment Mom and I shared during a year of upheavals.

“It's only temporary,” I can hear her saying as we climb the two flights of stairs adjacent to “Lowest Prices Anywhere” Samson's Appliances. At the top a hallway cuts left, right, and another right leading us to a three room apartment with handprint-smudged woodwork and noncommittal beige walls.

I focus on disturbed dust motes dancing in front of me as sunlight struggles to seep through nine-foot-high filmy windows. A refrigerator, stove and sink cram a living room alcove – no walls to contain odors, no door to hide a messy kitchen – bizarre.

I wrestle to open a window – the growl of a Greyhound bus roars two stories below, towering over road-mates as they jockey to leave the city and self-induced fumes behind. Across the street a Schlitz Beer sign blinks neon white, gold and burgundy, and although I'm unable to hear their words, the body language of the couple standing under it suggests an argument.

It's impossible to imagine living here. I hate my father for leaving, forcing us to move from the suburbs. I slam the window shut. This is no place for a twelve-year old and my gasp of disgust doesn't escape Mom's notice.

"This isn't going to be so bad after I fix it up," she cajoles. "We can put a border up there and it'll bring the ceiling down." Her arm sweeps toward a wall, "...paint it sort of a rose color. You'll see, this place will look nice for when we have company."

Company? I doubt it. I'm not ever bringing my friends here. Phooey, my friends are fifteen miles away; I have none here. My gasp becomes a snort and works its way into a snuffle.

Mom promises, "Remember, it's only temporary. We won't be here long, only until I find a better place."

I check out my bedroom and discover an unexpected plus – a black iron fire escape hangs outside my window. I budge the lower pane up and tentatively step out. A wind gust takes me by surprise, and when I peer through the grid under my tennis shoes, I

shudder. I scramble back inside, but the fire escape's uniqueness has intriguing possibilities.

The movers wheel in my furniture. I paw through my box of clothes, sniffing the familiar and begin unpacking.

Mom hurries into my room, eyes wide and fingertips to her lips. "Sweetie," she says, "We're going to have to share the other bedroom. We need to rent this one in order to live here."

What? We're not only living in the middle of Cincinnati, but I don't even get my own bedroom? I stomp into the living-room, and consider running outside. But, where? No bicycle, no park or playground, no corner candy store – simply one building smashed up against another, imprisoned by rolling steel.

My sniffles become sobs and I throw myself on the sofa. Mom, saying nothing, sits beside me and wraps her arms around me until I notice the movers' glances as they traipse in and out of the apartment. Eyes down, pouting mouth, I move my clothes to her bedroom.

Mom's true to her word. My aunt and she scrub the walls, working the sponges in circular motions – not to leave streaks – until the bucket's contents no longer turn a murky gray. All three rooms are painted a soft rose. The high border near the ceiling creates the optical illusion Mom hoped for and the forest green velveteen curtain does, indeed, hide the awkward kitchenette. Our mahogany dining-room table occupies the place of honor in the window nook and becomes a favorite for homework while surveying drunken brawls and streaking fire engines. But, I'm immune to the street-level hubbub as the apartment transitions into a home.

I adapt, an inner-city child, a latch-key kid who discovers recreation is volleying a tennis ball against cement buildings or sunbathing on a flat tarred roof. Other kids in the building and I race through department stores, sample deli-food, pilfer candy, until the manager shoos us out. We catch the streetcar and ride backwards to the end of the line.

A year later when Mom announces, “I found an apartment in a better location. We’ll be moving,” I’m dismayed and....

A cough disrupts my time travel. Clearing his throat, the associate asks, “So, Mrs. Klein, have you made a decision?”

“It doesn’t matter which I choose,” I whisper, too low for him to catch, and nod toward a serviceable, unadorned casket.

The salesman arches an eyebrow and challenges, “Are you sure Mother would want this one?”

“I’m positive. It is, after all, only temporary. She’s already moved to a better location.”