Tumbalalaika

by Beverly Akerman

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When the arguing started, their voices would get louder and louder, till they broke into my dreams. That night, I woke and listened in the dark for what felt like a very long time. Perhaps I should have been afraid, but I wasn't. For one thing, they never yelled at Lisa or me, and for another, they argued so often I was used to it. Besides, I learned a lot when they fought. But that night, the uproar was exceptional, even waking Lisa after a while, and she stood there in the crib in her fuzzy footed pyjamas, fingers in mouth, her eyes shiny and round as marbles. I finally got out of bed and padded down the hallway to see what it was about this time.

The two of them stood facing each other in the small dining area, so close they could have spit at one another, leaning in, their faces angry and red. Together they made a shape like a deformed heart, broken at the bottom and lopsided because my mother was almost a foot shorter than my father. I watched as my father raised a hairy fist to his chin. He had been on the YMHA boxing team before they were married. “Keep it up, Andrea,” he said, shaking his fist at her, “just you keep it up.”

“What are you going to do, hit me?” my mother countered. She turned and pointed a finger in my direction. “Karen is standing right there.”

My dad's head swivelled and we locked eyes for a second, then he hauled off and smashed his fist through the white wall beside them. There was a loud crash and, when he pulled his arm back, a round, dark hole. Frightened, I ran and jumped back into bed, telling Lisa she better do the same.

What shocked me most was that a wall could be so thin. I always imagined them rock-hard. Solid brick, all the way through.

So the next morning, when my father said we were going to Chomedey to see our new *house* and my mother said no, we were just going to look at the *flat* and they would make their decision later, I was pretty convinced that, no matter what she said, we would end up moving into that house or flat, whatever a “flat” was. My father usually made the decisions in our family, something that seemed natural to me then because he was so much larger and louder than my mother. He had black hair, not just on his head but all over, even on the backs of his hands. He had brown eyes and reddish sideburns. He let me stack his coins at the poker games he played on Saturday afternoons. My mother was pretty, even in anger, green-eyed with freckles and dark curly hair that she said had turned to straw since giving birth to Lisa and me. She wore black slacks and a royal blue cashmere sweater, her favourite, bought in those heady days before she quit working to be a stay-at-home mother. Those were the days, she would say, when she spent $100 on a pair of shoes without batting an eyelash. She was slowly ruining that sweater in the washing machine--she couldn't afford to dry clean it.

My mother was desperate to leave Montreal for the suburbs, where she said kids had the space to run around and make noise. She made it sound like so much fun, as though we would be yelling and roaring and banging on pots with wooden spoons all the time, like in *Where the Wild Things Are*. Until she made that comment about the noise, the thought of moving had left me feeling pretty desperate. My parents had taken the apartment on Cote St. Catherine Road when they were married. Of course, I thought it was perfect: it was the only home I'd ever known. Across the street was a big park, its swings set in the trees, like the middle of a forest, so you could swing in the cool shade instead of baking in the hot sun all the time. If you wanted the sun, there was the sandbox. The playground also had a series of twisting cement tubes, either end decorated with pieces of red wood suggestive of an engine and a caboose, so that together, the whole thing looked like a train. There was a wading pool too, but my mother wouldn't let us use it. She

said this was because she was afraid of water, because she had never learned to swim, but I thought she was also afraid of germs from other children, she just didn't want us to know. My mother was forever telling us how dangerous things were.

On the corner of our block stood an apartment building with two cement lions on either side of its three front steps. On our daily walks, Lisa and I would clamber all over the lions and whenever we did, my mother always stood right next to my sister, in case she fell. Lisa was a daredevil climber, part monkey, my mother often remarked. Once, we found her on top of a bookshelf as tall as my father. My mother said Lisa was too young to be afraid, that fear made you careful, that it was her job to be afraid for Lisa.

I also liked living around the corner from my grandparents. I visited them almost every day. My *Bubby* was very short, and she had orangey dyed hair, teased and combed and fastened on her head with hairspray, like a helmet. There was always ginger ale in her fridge and bright coloured hard candies in a heavy crystal dish on the coffee table in the living room. My *Zaida*, also short, would always pick me up and hug me as soon as he saw me. "*Mamashayne*," he would say, and then he'd kiss one spot on my cheek three times—"muh, muh, muh!" He smoked a pipe, and he would let me smell the tobacco, sweet and scented with cherries, that he kept with him in a leather pouch. Both my grandparents spoke with thick Yiddish accents even though they had lived in Canada for over fifty years.

The street my grandparents lived on had recently had its name changed from Maplewood to Edouard Montpetit. My mother was convinced that the new name was part of a plot to erase all the English from Montreal. My father said, "Andrea," in that way he had--as though her name was really much longer--whenever she said something he didn't like.

According to my mother, we were moving because the apartment we lived in was getting too small. Sometimes she joked that the problem was that Lisa and I were getting too big. But I thought that the real reason we were moving to get away from my grandparents.

My mother was always saying they were too close, that they were too involved in her life.

Sometimes my parents argued about this, too. “My mother's so domineering, she's always trying to control me,” my mother complained. “It's not enough that we come to her for *Shabbos* every Friday, but when we can't, she makes me send you over to pick up the food.” My dad would counter by saying *Bubby* was just trying to do something nice for her, to help out so my mother would have less work, not have to make supper on Fridays--which was usually chicken soup, roast chicken, *lukshen kugel* and canned wax beans, with canned pears or homemade fruitcake for dessert--but my mother shook her head at that and said, “You don't know her. All my life she's been telling me what to do. You don't know what it costs me every time I have to take something from her.”

Our car was a new black Pontiac Strato Chief with red seats and a shiny black steering wheel. There was a chrome Indian in a big headdress stuck on the door to the glove compartment, and a bobble-head Mountie travelled in the rear window. It was only May, and the Montreal heat was just gearing up, but the car was steaming inside from sitting for hours, all closed up, on the street in the sun. I rolled down my window and squinted through the hot breeze, searching for exotic license plates from other provinces. Our license plates used to say *la belle province*. Now they read *Je me souviens*.

“I remember what?” my mother asked, the first time she saw them. Then she answered her own question: “I remember how great it was here before the English came.” I never understood why she was always so angry about this; we weren't even English. We were Jewish.

When my sister fell asleep in her car seat right away, instead of bothering me the whole ride the way she usually did, I decided that the trip out to Chomedey wouldn't be all bad. We drove down Decarie to Laurentian Boulevard, passing Canadair and a field that reminded me of the Emerald City from *The Wizard of Oz*. On the field, black men in the whitest short-sleeved shirts, long pants and shoes I had ever seen were playing a game my mother told me was

called cricket. I thought that a babyish name for an adult game. My father said it was similar to baseball. Then there was about fifteen minutes of stopping and going, because the city was fixing the bridge. Chomedey wasn't on the same island as Montreal. To get there, we had to go over the back river. I wanted to know if there were any beaches we could swim at in Chomedey. My father said the water was too dirty to swim in. He pressed on the horn and announced, “In this province, there are only two seasons: winter and road work.” Then he started to sing the way he always did in the car, his favourite Yiddish love song, “*Tumbala*, *tumbala*, *tumbalalaika*…”

After driving for almost an hour, we finally arrived, hot and sweaty, my legs sticking to the vinyl upholstery. I also felt a little sick; my father used to get carsick when he was young, too. I opened the door, hopped out, and threw myself down on the grass. This lawn didn't look anything like the shimmering green of the cricket field. Instead it was made of thick, sharp blades of grass, yellow dandelions, and cracked brown bald spaces. The sky was a light blue, edged with white. There was a very young tree, just planted, tied to a wooden stake. My mother told me was put there to ensure the tree grew up straight.

“Sort of like a parent,” I said.

She laughed. “Like a parent, except that that stick didn't make the tree. A seed did.”

We looked up at the house. This kind of house was called a duplex, she said, two houses stuck together, one on top of the other.

“Which part's for us?” I asked.

“The upstairs,” my father said.

“Maybe,” said my mother.

“Andrea,” he said, making her name sound very long.

I used my arm to shield my eyes from the sun and waited for my stomach to figure out we had stopped moving, a process that sometimes took a while. In the meantime, my father mounted the stairs and rang the bell of the bottom half of the duplex, and a moment later the landlord appeared. His name was Benny Laxer, he

was a dentist and a friend of my uncle the accountant, the youngest of my dad's seven brothers and sisters and the only one who had gone to university. My mother's favourite sister had also gone to university, but partway through, my grandparents would no longer pay for it. So Auntie Sarah ended up at teachers' college instead. It had happened years ago but she was still angry at them. So was my mother, and not just for that.

My father never even made it to high school. He had quit school to help his parents make ends meet when he was twelve years old.

The two men shook hands and then came down the stairs so Benny Laxer could meet the rest of us. Benny Laxer was almost as tall as my father, but he resembled a basketball player more than a boxer. He had light brown hair and thick glasses and a son, my uncle had explained, who underwent regular operations to remove extra skin that grew between his fingers like webbing. When I heard about this, I had wondered if keeping that skin would have made him a better swimmer. Somehow I knew better than to ask Benny Laxer this as he greeted my mother, who held Lisa on her hip. My sister was still drowsy, slumped against my mother, fingers in her mouth, her head on our Mom's shoulder. After a few more minutes, I got up, took my dad's hand and jiggled it until he bent over. I whispered in his ear that I felt better, and he patted my head.

“These girls been to the dentist recently?” Benny Laxer asked.

“No,” said my mother.

“You should bring them to my office sometime, for a checkup. The little one go to sleep with a bottle?”

“No, never,” my mother said.

“Do you live here?” I asked, looking up at him, one hand keeping the sun from my eyes.

Benny Laxer bent over, placing his hands on his knees. “No, honey, I don't live here. I live with my family in my own house about a mile away. I'm just here to show you the flat.”

“What's so flat about it?”

“Hmm?”

“Karen,” my dad ordered, “stop pestering Dr. Laxer.”

The grownups didn't want to bother with Lisa and me any more than they had to while they took the measure of each other. My parents were trying to decide whether this was the right place for us; the suburbs closer to downtown, where my father worked, were nicer. Chomedey was the least expensive of the places they were considering, but it was also the farthest from the small factory where my father and his brothers made fur coats and hats. I had learned this and much more from eavesdropping during several of their arguments. Possibly Benny Laxer was trying to decide if we were the right people to rent to. He might have preferred a couple with no children: no dropping things down the toilet to see what would happen, no crayoning the walls, or swinging on the doors for fun, say. But who would move out here—"to the middle of nowhere," my mother called it--unless it was "for the good of the children"? Benny Laxer knew our family. Because of this, he must have thought it likely that our rent would be paid on time, that we wouldn't duck out in the middle of the night leaving the place a mess, like some of his previous tenants. That was why, according to my father, we were getting a good deal on the rent. My mother wasn't so sure.

I knew where she would rather be: New York City, where Auntie Sarah, her "favourite sister," lived. That was a joke, because Auntie Sarah was her only sister. They managed to stay close by speaking often, despite the long distance charges (another thing that could provoke angry words between my parents). Sometimes when they were on the phone, I would hear my mother say that she couldn't understand how she ended up stuck in Montreal, married to this gorilla and with two little girls.

Auntie Sarah's response, I imagined: "Shall I draw you a diagram?" This was one of their favourite expressions. One hot night the previous summer, when my aunt had returned to Montreal for a visit, the two of them had dragged kitchen chairs out onto the small balcony and killed a bottle of wine between them, repeating that expression to each other--"Shall I draw you a diagram?" or "Shall I paint you a picture?" Each time they said it, they would laugh till, as the night wore on, they were wiping their eyes.

Together we all went up the grey wooden porch stairs, and Benny Laxer unlocked the turquoise door--most of the duplexes on the street had their doors and balconies painted white or brown or turquoise--and led us inside. The staircase was steep and dark but, once we reached the top, it was very bright. The rooms looked large and airy; each had a wall of windows. The wood floors shined and the walls were a sparkling white. Benny Laxer said he had just had them plastered and painted. I spread my palms against them. They felt very cool and smooth, but when my mother caught sight of me, she hissed that I should keep my hands to myself. For the rest of our visit, I kept an eye out and only touched the walls when I was sure she wasn't looking.

There wasn't a curtain or a stick of furniture in the place. “When it's empty like this, it looks larger. It could be that, when we get all our furniture in, it'll be too crowded,” my mother told my father. His face fell. I looked at her carefully. I couldn't believe she really felt this way. Had she said this just to make Benny Laxer think she didn't like the place? Was she trying to let my dad know who was boss? This was another thing they would argue about. Sometimes this discussion was called “who wears the pants in this family.” I found this a bit of a mystery, because they both wore pants.

The bathroom had square white tiles framed by rectangular black ones, a white toilet and tub, and, on the wall with the sink, just above the mirror, a large thick, light fixture that looked like a giant throat lozenge. The walls were painted a deep, almost violent pink. In our apartment, all the rooms were white--this pink room took my breath away. I thought it was the most beautiful room I had ever seen. When I saw that bathroom, I immediately decided that my father was in the right on this one, but figured it would be smarter to keep my opinions to myself.

A door at the end of the kitchen opened onto a curvy black metal staircase, the kind of staircase that might lead to the dungeon in a fairytale castle. The metal slats of the steps had gaps between them. When I looked down through the gaps, I saw a small patch of lawn, the backyard, far below. For a second, I felt as though I was falling

and I grabbed for the railing. It was the first time I realized I was afraid of heights.

Benny Laxer went ahead of us, and we all clanged down after him. My mother set Lisa down on the grass and Lisa immediately stood up and toddled over to the staircase where she started climbing back up, this time along the outside of the railing.

"You can use the yard anytime," Benny Laxer said. "I just planted that clematis by the fence and a lilac bush over there." He pointed.

My father turned to my mother, put a hand on her back and in a quiet voice said, "You love lilacs." She faced the tiny bush squatting in the shadow of the staircase, no more than a few twigs and leaves, really.

"Probably years before there'll be any flowers. Not enough sun," she said. Then she walked away from him to pluck Lisa off the stairs, saying, "Come back here, you."

As we were leaving, my father and Benny Laxer shook hands again. Benny Laxer said, "Better let me know soon if you're interested. I have a couple more families coming over this afternoon to take a look."

"We're going to see some other places, too. We'll think about it and let you know," my mother said. My father opened his mouth like a goldfish. Then he shut it again without saying anything.

I looked carefully the whole time but I never figured out what was so flat about the duplex. Only the walls and floors, far as I could see. But these were flat in our apartment, too.

The arguing started as soon as the car left the curb. "We have to let him know today," my dad said. "We should have told him we'd take it right then and there, left him a deposit before one of those other families do."

"Don't you fall for his malarkey. He's just trying to put the pressure on," my mother said. It escalated from there: Chomedey was too far, Saint Laurent almost as bad, Cote Saint Luc, which my mother had her heart set on, was too expensive, and we couldn't

stay in Cote des Neiges because my mother was determined to get out from under the thumb of her own mother. My father kept insisting that the flat was perfect. Finally, he said, “Why don't we see what the kids think? Karen?”

“I liked it.”

“Lisa?”

“She's three years old, Sam. Don't tell me you're going to let a three-year-old participate in this decision? And what about the neighbours downstairs?” She added, “You forgot to ask about them. What if they hate children, or have a big dog? Maybe they're the type who like to play loud music all night long.”

“If you were worried about all that, why didn't you ask him? Why is everything always all my fault?”

“Who said that? I never said that.”

“You never actually come out and say it, but you blame me for everything.”

“I do not.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Well, I guess it's because you wear the pants in this family,” my mother said.

My dad reached forward to snap on the radio and they didn't say another word to each other the rest of the way home.

That night, I dreamt the walls in our apartment were covered with dark holes. And as I watched, green and brown snakes poured out of them, wriggling their way down and along the floor, towards my bedroom. I ran ahead of them, my only possible escape out the bedroom window and onto a twisty black metal staircase. I was afraid to go out there but more afraid to stay, so I stepped through the open window--white curtains fluttering on either side--and rushed down the stairs. Suddenly, the staircase started rocking from side to side and changing shape, shooting up to the starry black sky one minute, rushing back down to the ground the next. I held tight to the railing with both hands and screamed in terror.

For once, it was my shouting that awakened my parents. My mother came to see what was wrong and, when I told her I'd had a nightmare, she took me back to their bed. My father returned to his snoring almost immediately. I lay there between them for a long time before I calmed down enough to go back to my own room.

Next morning, as usual, my dad had already left for work by the time I got up. My mother was pouring Frosted Flakes into a bowl when she announced that we were moving to Chomedey after all.

“To Benny Laxer's flat?” I asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“What about the park?”

“There's a nice park named after John F. Kennedy that we can walk to,” she said.

“Does it have a pool?”

“We'll get our own pool, set it up in the backyard, maybe invite some of the neighbours over.” She poured the milk and put the bowl and a spoon on the table in front of me. “Eat, before it gets soggy.”

“What about the neighbours? Do they have a big dog?”

“They have two daughters and a son, no dog. Dr. Laxer says they're very nice.”

“Don't you fall for his malarkey,” I said.

Quick as snake bite, she slapped my face. “You don't talk to me like that, young lady,” she said.

My right cheek stung; I imagined her red handprint burned into it. I tried my hardest not to cry. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. I put a spoonful of cereal in my mouth. It tasted like nothing.

Right beside me was the spot on the wall where the hole had been. The super had come and plastered it over, but that just covered it up. No matter how smooth the wall looked, I knew it was still there. I could feel it.