

Assiduity Five

by J. Mykell Collinz

Here's my situation. Real estate prices dropped ridiculously low in a part of the city where I lived during a memorable period in my life before the neighborhood became dilapidated. I believe the area could rebound someday so I buy a whole city block. It's an investment, I tell myself. I'm not interested in living there, certainly not immediately. It's mostly empty lots, homes demolished years ago. Except, there are three very large three story houses made of brick and stone standing in the middle of the block facing a southeasterly direction which I'm hoping to restore. And I need the squatters to vacate.

I'm surprised to hear the doorbell ring when I press the button. Uzma answers immediately. It's a hot Monday morning and she's wearing almost nothing, barely enough to cover her private parts and tight enough to reveal their outline. She reminds me of an Ingmar Bergman character. Although I'm unsure of a specific film or actress.

"What do you want?" she says, standing in the open doorway, legs apart, hands on her hips, walnut blond hair wrapped in a loose bun, greenish blue eyes scanning my well toned body.

"I recently purchased this property," I say: "You're living here illegally."

She leans forward, eyes widening, lips pursed.

I'm unsure if she intends to bite me or kiss me.

With a flash of inspiration I realize she would be a perfect fit to play the lead character in my new screenplay. I quickly employ a different approach.

"Perhaps we can work something out," I say.

She moves back, rolls her head slowly to one side, slack jawed, eyes narrowing as she holds me in her gaze.

I'm unsure if her expression is menacing or condescending.

"You paid money to live in this neighborhood?" she says, slowly shaking her head while suppressing a laugh. Or pretending to do so. I'm unsure.

"I purchased the whole block," I say: "Which includes this house and the two adjacent houses."

"Why did you do that?" she says, expressing surprise and concern. Or perhaps she's exaggerating. I don't know.

"The point is, I own this property." I reply.

"You know how long it will take you to evict us?"

"I'm in no hurry to evict anybody. All I want right now is access, to look around, to inspect my buildings. Yet, if I find overcrowding, or other misuse of the property, I intend to take the appropriate steps."

"What steps?"

"I don't know what steps. I won't know until I get there."

"Well, you're here now, so look around then."

I step inside as she drapes herself in a bright orange, knee length, silk robe found hanging on a hook in the front door hallway. I watch as she preens in a full length mirror.

"I thought you said you wanted to look around," she says, turning to face me while securing the robe closed with a blue velvet sash.

"If these are your belongings here," I say: "I think you should be with me."

"Okay then, let's go up and visit my parents first. They're on the third floor."

"Your parents? Are there other people living here besides them?"

"Not anymore, no. Right now it's just me and my daughter. She's one year old today. And my parents."

"Where's your daughter?"

"She's upstairs with them."

We move together at the bottom of the broad staircase but then she hurries ahead. She maintains a distance of three or four steps above me even though I accelerate my pace to catch up. The winding staircase, which acts as a central column to the structural integrity of the house, reinforces my hope for a sturdy foundation below. I detect no sagging or creaking steps, no loose boards.

Designed and built in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century with quality materials and methods, the house has apparently been well maintained until fairly recently.

On the third floor, in a corner room down the hallway, Uzma's one year old daughter is sitting on a couch with her grand mother and father watching television.

Music from the TV sounds familiar.

"Hello, what are you watching?" I say while standing behind them.

The elderly couple continue singing quietly as they look back, acknowledge my greeting with a nod, and return to their program. The pretty little girl with blue eyes, blond hair, and wearing a pink dress reacts to my presence with greater enthusiasm. She jumps up and down on the couch seat, arms outstretched, hands pressing against the backrest for support.

Uzma stands beside me, and says: "They are singers. They like to sing along. It's a collection of early baroque, their favorite music video."

I'm charmed by the vocal music, the ambiance, their company; I'm delighted with the condition of the floors, walls, ceilings, doors, windows; I'm feeling reassured about this particular house; and I'm hoping the other two houses are similarly well constructed and maintained.

"Have you been inside the other houses?" I say.

"Of course," Uzma replies: "We are like a commune here. We share, we cooperate. I will take you. First, we talk. Let's go down, enjoy a cup of tea."

I sit at the table. I watch as she moves around the kitchen. I'm thinking, if she agrees to take the lead role in my new film, she's more important to me than the housing restorations.

