

Temporary Housing

by kate hill cantrill

This place, well, many things are wrong with this place. I know that; I do. I know that to mention one or even two things that are, say, problematic (my mother's word) and to avoid the fact that basically my home is a slum, would be essentially avoiding the truth. If I were to begin by saying, *My home is a slum*, then I could honestly get on with the issue at hand—issues, actually—the first of which is that I have a mouse. From what I hear, you got one mouse; you got em all. So the fact is, I have mice.

I might as well mention the other pressing issue before I elaborate upon the first. The second issue at hand is that I have bars on my windows. It is a first floor apartment and just down the street young boys stand on the corner and pull their sweatpants down to reveal their navels, even in the ice-cold Philadelphia winters, which means, essentially, that they are looking for Johns. I know this is off-track, but I just have to mention that this one night I saw a Cadillac, a big, shark-white one, round the block one time at a normal speed, the next time a bit slow-pokey, and the next time nearly creep-crawling. There was a very young, cold-headed looking kid showing his navel right there on the corner where the Caddy eventually stopped—right there on 17th Street and Pine—right where I live and where (it's wild when you think about it) the Mayor's wife used to walk her dog en route to the Dog Park, before they were Mayor and First Wife (Lady, I suppose is the correct term), but were still well known in the Philadelphia political scene, and trust me, I'm awesome at recognizing people by the bounce in their walk or the slight bob of their head so it was her. And although having bars on my windows is a welcome thing when there is a robber/rapist (I almost said racist, haha) prowling the streets, they become an extreme safety hazard in, say, the case of a fire, because these windows are padlocked—from the outside.

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I'm getting myself all worked up about this and am going to try to stay on course and will, therefore, go back to talking about the mouse, mice. So, I have one, or at least I have seen one, and no, he is not white as I would prefer. Not to make a racial thing out of it, I mean, I don't intend to compare people of color with mice—people *in general* with mice—although if you ask me, I don't give in to all of this Judeo-Christian hierarchy crap anyhow and see nothing wrong with comparing animals (mice) to animals (humans)—but, anyway, it has become a sensitive issue lately—as it very well should—that people equate black with bad and white with good, but *all* I am saying is that a white mouse with translucent, pink ears is a whole lot less nerve-wracking than a black mouse with coal-slick eyes. I do have two cats roaming this hovel—a white one and a black one (see, I have a black friend—haha just kidding—you know how people say that when they are trying to prove that they are not racist?). My cats are my world and more. They are rotund, little indoor-girl cats, though, who were taken from their mother too early to learn things like hunting and properly washing their privates, and so they think the mouse is just another interesting thing to stare at—just like the roaches. This mouse, in turn, is one no-fear mouse. Hell, sometimes I'll be watching TV and smoking a bowl and just generally chilling out and he'll come *doo doo doo* prancing out from under the stove like he owns the place! *Hey Dude, check out my righteous pad!* I came home from the emergency room (a.k.a. HELL) the other day at like, 3:00 p.m. (after being there *all night* because they are mean and they took *forever!*) and this mouse was sitting in the middle of my new throw rug staking claim. Actually, my little two-square hole in the wall is better sized for him than for me but hell, I pay the rent. My ex used to call it my Two-Room Ass-Hole, because it is so small. Haha, he's a pig but really, *really* funny! Everything has a good side. Even my apartment looks ethereal for about a half an hour every morning when the sun comes up in the springtime.

Now, I'm not so clear in the head in regards to dealing with this issue number one of the mice. My sister is good at this sort of thing, well honestly, she's pretty much perfect in general and

politically correct and all—not in an annoying way, just in the way that she never, *ever* says anything wrong and she never makes jokes that go badly and she has her facts down about Republicans and the Public School System and so she can hold a pretty sound conversation—but anyway, she is vegetarian and anti-glue-trap like I am and she gave me this little condo trap. Actually, the manufacturers don't call it a trap; they call it a 'temporary housing situation,' which cracks me up. Anyhow, she brought it over a few nights ago—I guess it was the night I went into the hospital—yes, it was because I remember we had a fight. I had a lot of dishes in the sink and they stank and she can't let things slide sometimes and she sort of flipped out on me about it and also about the fact that I can't seem to get myself together enough to call my landlord and get keys for those padlocks on the bars and she left my place chanting, *firetrap, firetrap, firetrap*, with her face all red and wrinkled and I thought that was totally insane. I know that it came out of that whacked-out combo of love and fear that sometimes takes over people, but that was crazy, like, psycho crazy. O.k. so she's not always perfect, but mostly she is. She has an important job and a nice place and degrees and friends and stuff like that.

Anyway, she didn't have a chance to explain this temporary mouse housing to me before she went ballistic and I'm not quite sure how to use it. I suppose I could have called her, but I just haven't felt like talking to her; you know? I haven't felt like talking to anyone these days. Do you ever get like that? Like, get to thinking that if you pick up the phone that rock bottom is simply going to shoot up and meet your feet instead of waiting for you to get there? I don't know; I just haven't felt like talking to her, not for any particular reason, except I guess I don't want her to think that I was just being all 'Drama Queen' that night or anything. I don't think she'd say that, at least not right away, but it would come out eventually. You know how things go with family. From what I can gather, I coax the mouse in with food, like a piece of cheese in the far end of the condo, and then this little switch gets tripped and a cracker that I have put inside the trap door swings down and 'temporarily houses' the

mouse with a piece of cheese and a cracker that he can partially eat??? That's where I'm not clear. That seems like a royally good deal, if you ask me, to be allowed to hang out in your very own brand spanking new condo with cheese and crackers and not have to work or worry about life outside and all. Give me some weed or cheap wine and I'd say that sounds a bit like heaven. Maybe that's my problem—maybe I have low expectations of life.

I'd ask my neighbors if they have mice and what they are going to do about them, but sometimes, I'm afraid of what they think of me. I know the doors to each apartment are thin and the most innocent of sounds can easily penetrate them. I'm sure they heard my sister chanting and I *know*, without a doubt, that they have heard my ex and I battling it out. Once, when he was *really* in a charming mood, he rammed into my door so hard, the chain lock broke and whacked me in the eye. He was just angry that I wouldn't let him in, and, even though I told him that I didn't think we were *healthy* for each other, he said he wanted to talk about it more. I told him to go home and give me a call, and he said, "Back away." So I started to walk closer to the door to explain to him that backing away was exactly what I was doing by trying to break up with him and that was when he "leaned hard," as he put it, into the door. It's funny, when I think about it now; none of my neighbors came over then to see if I was o.k. I mean, I *was*; he is not a violent guy or anything, but still, you'd think maybe they would just stop by and check.

I'd sort of like to just stay a stranger to them all, but that doesn't seem to be working. My one neighbor is either concerned for me, or she just likes my cats because she is always coming around and talking to me and fondling my little babies. She's about my age, maybe a year or two older—23, 24— and she sort of has the same style as me, that kind of professional chic that salesgirls in ritzy stores pull off. That's what I've been going for these days at least, although I don't think I have it down quite yet. I suppose she's sweet; I just don't feel up to getting to know anyone these days. It takes so much, god, what? Energy, I suppose, to get to know someone—to *really* get to know someone can knock you on your ass

from exhaustion. I'm more complicated than I may appear on the outside and usually that just freaks people out. I don't even know her name, which is the worst. I mean, she told me her name, probably repeated it once or twice too, but I can't seem to remember it. She just has an 'A' for her first name on her mailbox—I already thought of that. I think it is something kind of complicated; she looks sort of exotic with that olive-like skin I've always wanted. That stinks, though, to have to see her in the hall, or on one of those rare occasions when I muster the energy to do laundry and have to say, Hey, neighbor! That is *so* corny and I hate being corny. The other day she knocked on my door and I was actually standing just behind it, by my sink, smoking a bowl. I was about to shove a towel under the door when she went and knocked. I just stood still and held my breath and closed my eyes until she went away. Even when she did leave, I stood there for about a half an hour longer because she lives across the hall and can hear the floor creak. It makes me feel like someone is always watching me. It's not like I always smoke. It just helps me relax on low-down days. I've never been a really *grand* sleeper.

You know, it really isn't an effective way to get a person like me to motivate, you know? I mean, chanting *firetrap* like she's conducting some goddamn séance really does nothing but freak me the hell out and make me feel like even more of a capital L loser, which, by the way, I was already feeling like that day since I sort of slept in that morning and missed work again and essentially struck my last strike to find myself Audi 5000'd from that stellar position of book peddler. I really should have finished college; maybe I'd know a thing or two about life and how to live it. Really, though, it was just a super low day and my sister's timing was colossally bad. I will get to it. I will get to *everything* at some point. It's just that it takes a whole hell of a lot of energy to deal with a mouse, especially if you have the tendency, as I do, to think that animals, critters and all, have a hell of a greater right to be here (here, meaning planet earth) than we monster people with our monster cars and our monster homes and our no-good nasty trash and waste and all. You don't see mice going

around depleting the ozone with their gluttonous sense of superiority. Sometimes, honestly I just think, What's the point? We are just screwing everything up more and more every year and the other day I saw *yet another* stray cat climbing along the wall in my back courtyard, wondering why, I'm sure, he was so alone and unloved, and everything is just such an astronomical mess that I can't hardly take it sometimes. I care about people; I do, but they are just so quick to *screw things up* and my sister asks me why I smoke so much and why, when I do venture out, I have to get spit-up drunk. Because it's all too much, that's why! And I am such a goddamn hypocritical part of all of it because I have a mouse in my place and I'm like, *Oh, this is my place and you must go and find another place to call home.*

I do feel sorry for the boys showing their navels; that's for sure. I offered one my gloves once and he just turned his back on me, but I could see something in the way he did it that said that he was cold and he was so lost that he didn't even know where to begin and gloves just didn't seem to cut it. God, what a life, always standing around in the dark. I know there are some little girls who do it too, but they hang out mostly on Broad Street and I rarely have to see them. Anyway, I think I'm supposed to get the mouse inside the condo and take him to a park or something and let him free. I just hope he doesn't have any family or anything because how do we know how they will feel about being separated? We really know nothing here on this planet and I think, at least on good days I hope, that we are getting closer to admitting that.

I just want to be clear that no, I didn't take those few extra pills because my sister went Joan Crawford on me that day. I don't want that to be a weight on her—although I'm not so sure she would put two and two together anyhow, but still, to be safe, just let it be known that I just wanted to sleep, you know? My body was so tired. I have never felt so absolutely, infinitely tired in all of my 22 years. My feet felt cold like dead fish and my back felt like it had been hoisting furniture all day. I have, actually, been spending some time refinishing furniture that I find at the Salvy up the street—Salvy,

that's what I call the Salvation Army. It's amazing what people consider to be trash; my gain, though, and off point, once again, but the other day, the day after I returned from the hospital, I found a busted up old wicker rocker sitting so damn lonely in the corner of the store, waiting to be priced and I waited and waited until the woman sorting through the piles of tossed-away things finally gave me a price (only \$5.00!) and I hoisted it onto my back and carried it home and took it into the crummy courtyard behind my place and restrung it. I don't know how to wicker, or cane, I guess it's called, I mean, I know that it is an actual trade and all, but I am creative with things like that and I sort of did it like I used to plait my friend Naideen's hair in seventh grade. Naideen taught me the word, plait—I used to say braid, but now I say plait. Naideen, who I almost forgot about until I fixed that chair, she was the only black girl in my class—this was when I was still in private school in the suburbs, later, I went to public school in the city and things got a whole lot more colorful, which is really how I think things should be. But that day, that night, actually, right before the hospital and the chair and all, I remember clearly that my head felt like someone else's head—like someone with a much larger head than mine had switched with me and it just sat there, all confused and too heavy for my neck. My eyes were wild, though. They were so awake and alert—looking for mice in the dark, seeing shadows on the street skulking around at god knows what hour, planning out things like grocery lists, job possibilities and life in general. I was going batty in my own head and all I really wanted to do was sleep heavy. I wanted to sleep and dream about things that have to do with water, because usually those dreams make me happy in the morning. I wanted to have dreams like I do sometimes where I am an autumn leaf flit-floating on the cool surface of a river and swishing in and out of tiny ripples and tides. That's a rare sleep and that was what I needed that night, a rare sleep.

The doctor, the mean, You-are-healthy-in-the-body-so-why-are-you-being-so-careless-with-it-by-taking-too-many-anti-depressants-you-stupid-loser, doctor in the emergency room said the number was

what bugged him the most. "Bugged," that's what he said. He said if I had taken four, yeah, I was looking for sleep; five, even; but nine, no no no, that was not regular sleep in his eyes. I said, No, not regular sleep, a *rare* sleep. I just kept thinking of my two kitties and how they were going to get hungry if I wasn't home in the morning and also I was thinking that charcoal is just about the worst taste in all the world wide and I kept getting reminded of that because I puked the first cup up all over my hospital gown and it just stared at me all night. I told the nurse that I couldn't drink it and she said that the doctor would have no problem jamming a tube into my throat and pouring it down if that was what I wanted. They were all making it into such a big deal! They put an IV in me and everything! When I got up to go to the bathroom I had to drag my pole around. It was all very dramatic. I just kept thinking of my kitties and wondering if they would eventually eat the mouse if they got hungry enough. Really, I didn't even want to test that because I had no interest in getting locked up in some crazy ward with bright, fluorescent lights where they would make me take more drugs and I'd have to wear a nightgown all of the time. I saw *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and so I know what those places are about.

Thank god my mother was with me. I was SO SMART to call her from home when my heart started flipping out and I started sweating and my head went all manic-like on me. By the way—this is what happens when one takes too many anti-depressants—they rev you up; they don't calm you down so don't even think that or feel like you need to try it for yourself to see because it is NOT a fun feeling and you can totally die. He kept saying (the doctor), Did you know? Did you know that your kidneys or your liver would have failed you if you didn't come here? Did you know that? I said I didn't, and I guess I didn't, but you know, when you feel that much of a need for a rare sleep, information like that gets neatly shoved in the back pocket of your brain. He didn't like my creative use of words at all and said that I would have to talk with the psychiatrist to see if I knew that or what and so I had to wait and man, was waiting HELL! Thank god my mother was there. She hasn't always been there, you know, in

the mother sense, but that night she was and she handled it all very well. She told me what they would want to hear in order for them to allow me to leave. She would have me see her therapist—the man with long pants, I call him—as soon as I got out and he is brilliant and really spiritual and that is more the track I am thinking of taking these days. (I shouldn't just say it, but I suppose it's o.k. to mention that she had once been in a very similar position herself). Those pills had a hold on me that just felt wrong. Don't judge it, though, the fact that I have stopped taking my “Happy Pills” unless you can say that you have been inside my exact shoes. If you did, then you'd know what a drag it is to see you, haha.

I had to try to calm down before the Psychiatrist came or she'd lock me up pronto. I was very nervous—hopped up, I guess you can say, from all the pills in my system and it was a hard road coming down. My mother was great. She was a nurse once and was sort of in her element there, within all the chaos of the hospital. I was really a wreck and what made it all worse was that there was a woman in the bed next to me, separated by a curtain, who was screaming because of an infection in her privates. I hate to say it, I mean I HATE to say it, but the room smelled of sick privates and I had a hell of a time not coming off as crazy in that situation. I just kept thinking of my kitties and of the mouse and how I really didn't want them to eat him because, first of all, he is very small and wouldn't fill them up, and also, because he has lived with us for so long that it just wouldn't seem right. It would be like incest, no, wait, that's sex and I mean eating one's own—cannibalism, that's right. Anyway, I just wanted out and my body just wouldn't stop writhing and jerking and again, I'll say it again: Thank god my mother was there.

She did this awesome thing that she used to do with the terminal kids whenever they were receiving shots or something painful like that, or even when they were dying (because kids like that, she says, always know when they're dying)—she sort of tapped on me with her fingers in specific spots, over and over. It sounds dumb, I know, but she just tap tap tapped me on my leg when it jumped around or my arm when it twitched and it was just like she was feeding me with

something through her finger. It was like she had a goddamn tube for a digit and was pouring warm milk right into the parts of me that weren't doing so hot. It was like she took care of my body for a while, so I could take some time off and just hang out without it—I could just lean my brain back against the pillows and let my blood pump through it like a stream, and I did, I *really* did, dream of water and of being a leaf flit-floating above a cool river. If anyone asks me, I am going to say that's how it was when we were curled in the womb—that a tiny, amazing tube connected straight into our middles gave us everything we needed so that we could sleep and dream and save our strength for the outside, because that was where we'd need it.

When she finally got there, clip boarded and cranky, the psychiatrist made it obvious to me that she hated me. She didn't care for any of my jokes and when I asked her if she ever tasted charcoal she looked at me slit-eyed and when I said that I recommended the grape juice over the charcoal she wrote something down that I couldn't see. I had to stop myself from saying that I just wanted my mother to take me home to my place, which is not so bad because it is mine and it does keep me warm, and I wanted her to come inside and maybe look at my dishes and not *do* them, but maybe not mention them, either, because she knows what it's like to not be able to hear something at a particular moment. I remember quite a few times growing up when she was not prepared to hear something—when she would just stay in bed and cover her ears with that white blanket I loved for hours and hours. I look loads like her these days. She's better now, a sound sleeper, but still, she understands. Coming home from the hospital, she said that most people *assume* life, but a few need to *choose* it. Sometimes when she talks like this as she drives, the car slows down and I can hardly hear the motor anymore.

"Foolish" was my diagnosis. Hell, I could have told them that if only they'd have asked. I couldn't believe "foolish" was a proper diagnosis. I was thinking maybe, "complicated," or "sensitive," but she gave me "foolish," probably from all the jokes and because of

the charcoal puke stain down the front of my gown. Lord, I am a mess.

My place is not *terrible*. I mean, it's not the greatest apartment, but there are worse to be found. It's just that it has seen some better days. I figure if there is a fire, I will be able to go out my front door. I suppose that would mean that the fire was started by me. I do like the soothing flicker of a candle once in awhile. I am militant, though, with my curling iron and I don't even own a toaster oven—there's no room on the counter for one. I'm trying to clean the place up and have gotten rid of some old things so that my space can be comforting as opposed to claustrophobic. It will be easier to catch the mouse this way, too. The man with long pants thinks cleaning up my place is an important thing to do. I like him because I know I can tell him anything and he isn't going to judge me, like, I told him that I had so many dirty dishes, that I had to wash them in the bathtub and he just said that was very resourceful. He says more important things, but mostly, I like to keep them between him and me.

Yesterday, it felt like the first day of spring, although it is only February, but it was warm and sunny and smelled wonderful—like clean trees! It felt like something good was coming and I was actually kind of anxious to go outside and I just stared out my window thinking of who to call. I would have called my sister—I really would have, I mean, it's not like I'm never going to talk to her again, and, although I think I have it figured out, I still want to go over this mouse housing with her—but she was away on a business trip and so I didn't. I saw my *Hey, neighbor* with an 'A' walk into her apartment and thought that if I could remember her name, I'd ask her if she wanted to go get something to eat, because you can't very well ask someone to eat with you if you don't know their name. I thought I came up with a *brilliant* plan and I brushed my teeth and combed my hair and powdered out the shine on my nose and walked across the hall and knocked. Hi, neighbor! I said and I opened up the organizer that my sister had given me about a year before and took the cap off of my pen with my teeth. She said, Hi, Julia, really

sweetly. I told her that I thought it would be a good idea that we have each other's phone numbers, even though we were just across the hall from each other. She said that was a great idea. I ripped off a piece of paper with my name and number and asked her for hers. But first, I said, how do you spell your first name? I said, I got your last name from your mailbox, but I just want to make sure I spelled your first name right because I am a crummy speller (which I *am*), and I am using a pen. I showed her my pen and she just looked at me. O.k., I said, A... She hesitated for a moment and then said, M... I said, Uh, huh, and? Y, she said, and then she stopped. Y? I asked. Mm hm, she said, Y. I said, O.k., great. She said, Great. I said, See you later and she said, See you, and she started to close the door. I stuck my hand on the door and said, For some reason, I thought you spelled it with an *I*. She smiled a little and shut the door the rest of the way. I walked back into my place and shut and locked my own door. Food could wait; it would probably start raining or sleeting out anyhow; that's how winter is here. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a small, charcoal colored streak cross my throw rug. My cats were both sleeping belly-up on the sofa and the white one twitched like she was dreaming.

I think the mouse suspects that something is up. I say *mouse* now, singular, because I really think I have only one—despite the rumors of mouse-fertility. Maybe he just needed some space from his friends or something, and moved here. I have been good at keeping a fresh cracker in his condo and have really been actively trying to 'house' him. It's time that I take him somewhere else. Sometimes we have to let go of what we hold onto, even if it feels a bit like family. Sometimes we have to wake up and choose to stay up, even when the sun sets early in the day, and all we have to look forward to is spring and all the wonderful morning light she brings. But sometimes, on the other hand, we just have to hide out for awhile, like the mouse has been doing in my home, until we can gather the strength to go somewhere brighter, because life calls for energy, and energy calls for life. Exhausting, truly.

I think I found the spot where I will release my mouse if and when I do get him—it is under a knotted maple tree by the Schuylkill River. I walked there today and saw two gothic teenagers having a picnic and it looked like a great spot. It was still cold, but the sky was clear. The Canadian Geese (who no longer migrate because their magnetic pull to the earth, which gives them a sense of direction, is all screwed up because of urban sprawl and cellular phones and things) don't really mess around that far down the river, so that shouldn't be an issue. I wish I could explain how the two Goths were so darkly lovely! They both wore capes and shiny black boots and dark lipstick. She had burgundy hair, I think, and his was black. They were pale as fright and they were eating out of brown lunch bags, which cracked me the hell up. It was like light and dark all mixed up and turned around—day and night; sun and moon; evil and good; gothic and picnic. They ate apples, too. How funny things are, sometimes. (Oh, and the other night I also saw one of the navel boys eating an apple and I was *so happy* that he was doing something good for himself; it's not easy to be good to yourself when you're as lost as that). I think the mouse would really like it there, by the muddy river. I picture him eating through his final cracker and then heading out alongside the ways of the water—running in a dark streak over the sun-struck stones and the swells of the earth and in between the trees that hover over the river—that deep, thick river that takes all the unwanted things out of this wonderful city I live in.

