

Winter was creeping into the house — through every cracked window, through the rotting bricks and absent insulation, through the front doors that never closed properly. Few of the ancient radiators in the rooms coughed up heat; mostly they clanged and banged energetically but stayed icy cold to the touch. There were no extra blankets allocated, no warm clothing, no layers of socks to keep us from feeling numb inside and out. The porch was abandoned. Morning coffee disappeared twice as fast as usual. And depression settled everywhere, finding many hosts. The owner made complaining noises about the

price of oil, the inability of the tenants to properly bleed their rads, every open window or door a rationale for turning down what heat there was. "I'm not paying hundreds of dollars so some bastard can heat the outside!"

A few rooms, especially those on the first floor, seemed to capture all the heat and became unbearably hot, while the second and third floors left people with blue nails and white skin. The owner, with his first-floor office, said, "People are complaining about how hot it is, and you want me to turn up the thermostat?" Coming from his home, better fed and better dressed, he wandered around in his shirtsleeves complaining he was sweating from the heat.

None of us knew about the city by-law demanding a minimum of 72 degrees; inspectors were a rarity here. Snow drifting down from the sky was no occasion for joy; it sealed us inside as it piled up, making the trek to the dining room wet, slippery and unpleasant.

It was no one's favourite time.

Alice, forced like Dennis to go down to the hospital to collect her ration of pin money, would wrap a towel around her head, tucking the ends inside the neck of her dress. Her coat had no buttons left, so she tied it with an old, cracked belt from which the buckle had long ago disappeared. She had no boots, so her feet were always soaked by the time she made it back. At least when she left the hospital she could afford to take a streetcar back, so there was only one-way misery. Nobody at that institution seemed to notice or care

about her inadequate clothing.

Miss Pattison wore her coat constantly from October to April, held together with two buttons and a variety of safety pins. She at least had black rubber rain boots to wear as she picked her way through snowdrifts to her diminishing flock of birds. In his shirtsleeves, Barry went home to his ageing mother and stepfather, banging on the door until they promised to buy him a down-filled jacket. It was stolen a week after he received it. Red never noticed the change in temperature, naturally insulated against the cold with his ninety-proof blood. I had no boots or gloves, but I did have a warm jacket I took to sleeping in.

We grew used to the cold as the weeks passed, making do, always making do. The owner eventually had to turn the heat up or risk losing a few of the old people to the morgue. He even sent Red and Jack around to each of the rooms to properly bleed the rads, and had someone in to fix those that had given up the ghost. Mine went from cold to warm to almost hot. I covered my cracked windows with green garbage bags filched from the storage room, attached with wide strips of adhesive tape that Jack lent me.

I stuffed newspapers under my door at night to keep out the draft from the hall.

The common room, in spite of its larger windows and proximity to the front door of 1243, was fairly warm, perhaps because of all the bodies huddled there. It seemed too cold in the house for the lice to survive, which meant the cloth couches could be used without

too much worry. That was the only perceptible benefit of winter.

People slept more than usual, dreading the cold floors, freezing toilet seats and, worse, the trek to the dining room. Depression was everywhere, and you could tell from people's faces that a number wondered whether they would survive the season, especially with the mockery of Christmas lurking around the corner.

Gary spent almost a week silent and brooding in his bed after receiving a card from his mother, who was in Florida with her latest lover; a cheque for five dollars was tucked inside and a "Love, Mother" scrawled hastily on the bottom. Dennis's mother called, for the first time since last December, saying she was coming for a visit. For two days his homely face was radiant; he told everyone in a voice wrapped in pleasure that his mother was coming to see him. I missed the event, but the owner told me she dropped into the office, asked that her son be brought to her, gave him a reluctant peck on the cheek and a hat-and-scarf set and was gone within ten minutes of her arrival. Other obligations. Dennis, like Gary, took to his bed, crying out his own misery.

The owner rented a working television to try to cut through the pervasive gloom. He hadn't replaced the one with the kicked-in screen for over six months, punishing all the tenants for the actions of one psychotic woman who had been evicted within two minutes of her tantrum. Somehow, seeing those ersatz families gathered around glowing fireplaces, singing carols and

Seeing Myself Again

feasting, did nothing to decrease our sense of abandonment and loss. We left the TV on, even so, night and day, always trying to get some warmth, some laughter, from the black-and-white flickering images. There was no talk of how we were feeling; no one gave voice to the emotions pervading the house.

It was a dirty secret no one mentioned.