

## Cards, Cigarettes and a Touch of Arson

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The front porch helped. From there I could see the three buildings that comprised this boarding house. The house was in fact three houses, which altogether took up a third of a city block and three street numbers. My porch stretched across 1241 and 1243. These had once been semi-detached houses, but walls had been opened up between the two, so that they became one house. A set of stairs led to each entrance-way. Immediately adjacent was the corner house, 1245, whose ground floor was taken up by the kitchen and dining room. To get to my porch retreat, I had to walk past an office on the first floor. It was easy to peek in the mostly glass door, but I had yet to see anyone actually sitting behind the old-style office desk. It was as sparsely furnished as the few bedrooms I had seen: the owner's chair was behind the desk, and a

couple of dining-room chairs sat in front. There was a jumble of pill bottles on top of the desk, a phone and a chess set that looked as though it had been left in the middle of a game. Once I heard someone who I assumed to be the owner screaming loudly enough to be heard from behind my closed door on the third floor. Something about idiots and drunkards. I was not looking forward to meeting him.

I spent whole afternoons on the porch in the sun, my back against the railing, watching the line-up start to form around three in the afternoon for the five o'clock supper. I could look at individuals without having to speak to them, sneaking glances as they sprawled on the steps or made their way between the buildings.

Seen in the light, some were less scary, some even more frightening. A few poorly dressed but tidy middle-aged women would smile shyly at me as our eyes accidentally met, or as I passed them on the stairway. An old Korean gentleman bowed to me every time he saw me, proudly displaying rotten and missing teeth, laughing at whatever tickled him.

A horrible man with crawly lips and a head that seemed glued to one shoulder gave me the shivers. There were others with missing arms or legs. The old guy who'd wielded the fork in the line-up turned out to be fairly pleasant, buying me coffee the few times he went down to McDonald's. He wouldn't speak; I wasn't sure he knew English. He'd just shove the cup at me, piled high with sugars and cream, then sit a few stairs down from me and point his face at the sun.

The first person to really speak to me was Andy, which was lucky, since he was the least crazy. He stank, but I suspected I did too. I never took off my clothes, always ready for fight or flight, needing to feel a little armoured. Deodorant was a luxury I couldn't afford, and I wasn't about to attempt a bath in a room that didn't lock, and which was always in high demand. Not to mention that there was no plug for the tub, or hand soap, or towels, or curtain, or mat.

Andy walked funny, with a kind of flat-footed waddle, but his eyes looked unmedicated, and he was polite and friendly, not given to sudden moves or bizarre statements. We were probably the same age; certainly we were in the same circumstances. Names first, then the important stuff out of the way, like what hospital we were from, I could finally begin to ask some of the questions milling about in my head.

The house was owned, according to Andy, by a couple who'd bought it a few years before. The husband was the one who ran the place, who bought groceries and collected the cheques. Andy didn't appear to know any more than I did why this kind of place existed, but he assured me there were hundreds of them. He'd been in half a dozen or so himself.

He'd lived here for five years. I couldn't believe he could say that so matter-of-factly. He shared a room on the first floor, to the right at the bottom of the staircase, with three other men. He seemed to hold most of the tenants in easy contempt. He warned me about how many thieves there were in the building, warned me

about Jack, and a couple of other bullies whom he dismissed as loudmouthed drunks.

As people would appear on the porch, he'd give me thumbnail sketches of who they were and how long they'd been here. Occasionally he'd yell at someone to come over, and then he'd introduce me.

It was always like being introduced to the bogeyman. Long minutes would pass before the fear stopped distorting my vision and I could see them as people, as individuals caught up in the same mess I was.

There were very few women in the house — less than a dozen out of seventy — and those were mostly elderly alcoholics.

"There's the Phoney Father, he's away now, but he'll turn up soon as Miss Pattison's money runs out." Miss Pattison liked to feed the birds with leftovers, but was otherwise known as the house tyrant. Everybody in the house had been, or was on the way to being, crazy. "But if they get too nuts, the owner gets the hospital to take them back, or kicks them out."

Andy went on to tell me that his second roommate, Old Bob, was only really crazy on weekends, when he was more a pain than a problem. "I've shared that room with him for years, and it's always the same — up early, to bed early, yelling at us to turn off the light around seven. Then he listens to religion on the radio Sundays, and walks around yelling and cursing at the program, damning everyone to hell. Him and that stupid pipe of his. He's always setting off the smoke-detector and getting yelled at. Then doing it again."

One afternoon, a man-mountain with straggly black hair, a growth of something on his chin that couldn't really be called a beard, a bare, sunken chest and a low-riding, ballooned-out stomach that hung over his belt wandered out onto the porch. My hands began to sweat and my breathing constricted.

"There's never a goddamn chair. I always bring one out, and some stupid son of bitch goes and moves it!" He spat something disgusting over the rail onto the brown lawn, a gesture accompanied by hawking and deep rumbling.

"Shut up, Gary, I'll get your bloody chair. This is Pat, the girl I told you about."

Gary stuck out a grime-encrusted paw, and having no choice, I offered my own, only to see it disappear in his.

"Hi. Seen you around. Felt sorry for you, you looked so scared. Don't have to be scared. Get my goddamn chair, Andy. And bring one for Pat."

He released my hand from his surprisingly soft grip, and we waited in silence until Andy came back, dragging a few kitchen chairs. In a moment, we were lined up at the rail, our chairs tilted back, our three pairs of feet hanging over, Andy on one side of me and Gary on the other.

Andy continued, "I been telling Pat about the house. She's not from around here, she's from Quebec."

Gary was trying to roll a cigarette, sprinkling tobacco around his gaping navel and onto the porch.

"Well, you just don't worry. Andy and I have the front bedroom." He gestured over his shoulder, sending

more tobacco flying. "Anyone bothers you, come and get us. I been here for years. I come from Whitby Psych. Where you been put? Third floor? You got your own room? Good. Ask Jack to put a lock on for you, or Andy can do it."

"Sure," Andy added, "ask me before you ask that bastard Jack." The epithet didn't surprise me, since I'd figured out that Jack was the one who served up insults with the dinners.

It didn't take long to figure out that Gary's bark was considerably worse than his bite. When he told me he'd spent seventeen years in Whitby Psychiatric, I stared, open-mouthed.

"Yep. They sent me there from training school. Then the assholes give me a bus ticket and an address and I wind up in this house."

"What got you sent to training school?"

"I don't know. Supposed to have tried to strangle my mom when I was in grade school. That's what she says. Training school scared the shit out of me, I was always crying, then I got sent to Whitby."

He'd been here seven years. He remembered the last owner, a born-again Christian.

"Ha! Some Christian! She had a mouth on her. And the crap she called food . . ."

Over the next few weeks, we talked, smoked and drank coffee on the porch every sunny day. With names and faces and histories to attach to people, the shadows receded and I felt freer to move around the house. I was accepted as Gary's friend, and protected.