



HARRY WILSON

Readers Write

MOVING IN

MY NEIGHBOR ABBY CALLED ME ONE morning in late summer to tell me she had crushed her lower vertebrae and would no longer be able to climb stairs. “If you’re still willing,” she said, “the time has come for us to trade apartments.”

Her third-floor apartment, where she had lived for twenty-five years, was the prize residence in our rent-controlled building in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It had windows in all four directions, making it feel like a treehouse in summer and

flooding the rooms with light in winter. I lived on the ground floor. When I’d moved in five years earlier, Abby and I had joked that if she ever got too old to climb the stairs, we could trade. She was a vibrant eighty-two-year-old woman who spent her summers on an island off the coast of Maine and walked for miles every day. I had assumed I would move out before the stairs became unmanageable for her.

Abby was all business about the swap, but I knew the loss of her beloved home

was a huge blow. I also felt guilty because my first-floor apartment was dark and narrow, perhaps the least desirable unit in the building. She offered to pay the movers if I oversaw the process while she was in Maine. I called two beefy brothers who charged fifty dollars an hour. It would take ten hours to accomplish the task.

Simultaneously dismantling and reconfiguring twelve rooms felt like a circus act. I paid close attention to how each of Abby’s rooms was arranged before we dismantled it so I could make it look the same — or as close as possible — after the move. I spent two days hanging pictures, filling cupboards and closets, and trying to make the place feel like home to Abby when she returned. Of course I couldn’t duplicate her arrangements exactly, because the apartments were so different. But the results, I thought, were miraculous. I felt like a magician who yanks the tablecloth off and leaves all the dishes in place.

On the day of Abby’s return I invited her two best friends over for a lunchtime homecoming party. I was proud of what I had accomplished and assumed she would be pleased. When we greeted Abby as she walked in the door, she began to cry. Her tears, however, were not of joy or relief, but of loss. Her two friends joined in, and the three of them sat at the kitchen table, sobbing for all that would never be the same again.

*Francis Collin Brown
Port Townsend, Washington*

AT SOME POINT MY MOTHER GAVE UP trying to stop me from moving in with Rick. I was fifteen and he was twenty-two when I went to live with him in his house on the edge of a bad neighborhood. The rent was cheap, but the place had no heat and a big hole in the kitchen floor that we covered with plywood. Bugs came up from underneath anyway.

A few months later Rick decided we should buy a house. We stopped paying rent and managed to save enough for a down payment before we got evicted. When we went house hunting, Rick had me drive his car to the realtor’s office so that I would seem older, even though I had only a learner’s permit. I talked him

into buying a little wood-sided house that was about an hour from my school on the city bus. (I was afraid that if I rode the school bus, someone would find out I wasn't living with my mother.)

Rick went to work the first day after we'd moved in, leaving me to sort out the house. It was summertime, so I was out of school. I wandered around, frightened and uncertain. A fly buzzed against the large picture window, and I spent a long time trying to kill it with a paper-towel roll. Then I realized I had to go to the bathroom, but the water wasn't turned on yet. I walked around the neighborhood looking for somewhere to go, feeling I should be more effective than I was, that I should be a proper housewife. When Rick got home, he was angry with me for having wasted time all day.

Nothing ever changed. The house was always filthy, the sink was always full of dishes, and we never entirely unpacked. When I was home alone, I would lie on our sweat-soaked mattress and wonder whether I could still go home to my mother.

*Erica N.
Allston, Massachusetts*

MY FAMILY AND I WERE SITTING ON wooden crates in our tiny apartment, reading a paper that my older sister had brought home from the cafe where she waited tables. My father and I were reading the front page, my younger sister the funnies, and my mother the classified section. "Look here," my mother said. "There's going to be a furniture auction Saturday, and it will be within walking distance."

Our apartment was empty except for the crates. We slept on the floor, just as we had slept on the deck of the boat that had brought us from Holland to the United States in 1939. We'd been homeless for six years, so to us this small, unfurnished apartment seemed palatial.

The auction was held on a brisk New England fall day. We arrived early to look over the furniture. My parents wanted to buy a bed for themselves, and there was a blond bedroom suite with a double dresser and vanity. It was infested with wood worms, but that didn't discourage my mother. When we'd lived in Europe,

my father had once brought home an old wooden icon marred by worm tracks. My mother had bathed the icon in vinegar over and over until she'd gotten rid of the worms. She was confident that she could eliminate the worms from the bedroom set the same way.

We counted our money. Between the five of us we had a total of twenty dollars. We elected my older sister to be the bidder, because her English was the best.

Once the proceedings started, we were dumbfounded by the rapid-fire chatter of the auctioneer. We could not understand a word. Luckily the bedroom set was last; by then we had learned how to bid. The first bid was for ten dollars. My sister raised it to twelve. Someone said fourteen. We were getting nervous. My sister bid fifteen dollars.

At that moment a middle-aged woman sitting in front of us turned around and said in a loud voice, audible to all in the yard: "Damn Jews. I wish Hitler would come over here and help us build a few

concentration camps. We need them."

We were stunned. We got up to walk out. My father, who had been in a concentration camp, had tears in his eyes.

As we neared the exit, we heard the *bang* of the auctioneer's hammer and his loud voice: "Sold!" We turned around. The bedroom set was ours for fifteen dollars.

We carried that set piece by piece back to our small home, where we polished it and treated it with vinegar. None of us ever forgot the afternoon we acquired it.

*Renate G. Justin
Lakewood, Colorado
(end of excerpt)*

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
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Borrowing	August 1	February 2010
Walking Home	September 1	March 2010
The Beach	October 1	April 2010
Sugar	November 1	May 2010