

The Man Upstairs

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“Please tell me it’s not true. Tell me he’s not moved in already.” Mrs. Kaplan blurted out as we stood waiting for the elevator.

“Shhhh, shhhh. Talk low. He could walk in any minute.” Mrs. Zimmerman warned.

“Good, let him hear me. Who needs them here. This was a good neighborhood. Why can’t they just leave us alone?”

As they continued to wait in front of the bronze elevator door Mrs. Kaplan continued lamenting the imminent demise of her world. The two women took no apparent notice of the little school girl who had slipped in behind them as Mrs. Kaplan’s voice started to rise.

“You know what this means, don’t you?”

“Rose, please don’t aggravate yourself. You’re gonna make yourself sick. Maybe it won’t be so bad.”

“Not so bad? Hilda, where are your brains? They’re here. Here. In OUR building!”

“Rose, listen. This is one man we’re talking about. One single man. Not exactly an invading army.”

“Go ahead, Hilda. Make jokes. Didn’t you see what happened to East New York when the *schvartze* moved in? That used to be a nice neighborhood. Now look. Can’t even walk down the street without worrying about getting mugged.”

“I can’t understand how such a good-looking man is still single? And he’s quite a sharp dresser.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Who do you think I’m talking about? Our new neighbor. The man upstairs.”

“You saw him?”

“Yes. The other day he was bringing some of his things in. We passed in the lobby. He was quite polite, actually.”

“You talked to him?”

“Yes. I did. He said hello so I said hello back.”

“Oyy, I can’t believe this.”

“Believe what, Rose? What are you making such a fuss about?”

“What planet are you living on? Soon, very soon. Mark my words. We’ll be outnumbered. If you have any sense left, you and your husband will start looking for a new apartment.”

The two women continued to argue as the elevator door slowly opened. Juggling my books and a bag of groceries I stood silently behind them. Mrs. Kaplan seemed so sure of herself. I didn’t like her though. I was relieved when the two women got out.

After landing on my floor I confidently strode the mosaic-lined hallway. Squeezing the key Ma made for me at the hardware store I started planning. Finally I would have the apartment all to myself. A rare occurrence. Ma had just started working in an office. My little sister Karen was spending the afternoon at Ester’s house. I couldn’t wait to play my new 45s.

As I opened the refrigerator to put away the milk I heard a knocking sound. Must be next door I thought. I heard it again but louder. It was the door. Visitors to the building were supposed to ring the bell downstairs in the lobby to get buzzed in. Who could be at our front door?

A thumping from deep in my chest began to rise within my ears. I froze.

Suddenly I heard a low melodious voice speaking over three more knocks.

“Hello. Is anyone home?”

Standing on my tip toes I inched my way over to the door. Closing one eye I squinted through the tiny peephole. A tall slim Black man stood waiting.

“Oh my G-d. It’s him.” I thought. “The new tenant those women were talking about. What could he want with me?”

“Maybe I’ll just make believe I’m not home. Maybe he’ll go away. What if he’s stalking me and knows I’m here all by myself? Oh, I wish Ma was here.”

“Hello, it’s your neighbor. From upstairs. I have something that belongs to you.”

“Impossible. He’s lying. If he thinks he can trick me into opening this door he’s wrong. Mrs. Kaplan was right. I better call the police.”

“I’m your neighbor. I was in line behind you in the grocery store. You forgot to take your pie. The cashier asked me to bring it to you. I didn’t want it to go bad.”

Pie? I quickly glanced back at the groceries sitting on the kitchen table and felt a giddy rush. What a relief. I could feel my heart immediately slowing down.

I looked through the peephole one more time, just to make sure.

Yep, there it was. I saw my pie nestled in his large graceful hands.

In less than a minute I unlocked the door and swung it open. I had to lift my chin to see his face. Still in his work clothes, he was impeccably dressed in a crisp white shirt and cranberry tie. Gracefully leaning forward he gently placed a flat white box tied with red and white string into my outstretched hands.

“How did you know where I lived?” I asked.

“I saw you with your mother and little sister leaving the building last weekend as I was coming down behind you. But you didn’t see me.

“You really didn’t have to go to all this trouble.”

“Oh, really it’s my pleasure. Glad I could help.

I stood silently watching him turn and walk away. Glancing back over his shoulder he lit up the entire staircase with the warmest smile I had ever seen. “Enjoy the pie!” he said with a chuckle.

“Thank you. I will. Hope to see you again.”

“I hope so too.” he responded.

But I never did.

Long after closing the door I thought often about the man upstairs. It made me glad and sad all at the same time. Glad not just because I got my pie back but because I got to see and remember my neighbor’s smile. Sad that mean old Mrs. Kaplan would never see it.

Mrs. Kaplan continued to rant and scare the other neighbors. I was really happy when she finally moved out. The man upstairs minded his own business, never causing any trouble for anybody. Eventually all the white people in the building moved away, including me and my family.

I knew in my heart that Mrs. Kaplan was wrong. Dead wrong. But that didn’t seem to matter. The only thing that seemed to really matter back then was the fear.