

ERYN HISCOCK

## EVICITION DAY

ON TUESDAY MORNING, 9 July 1985, the sheriff knocked on our front door with a sharp, brass-knuckled rat-a-tat-tat. I didn't go down to answer, just stayed upstairs and burrowed deeper into my sleeping bag. His knock was less violent than the fusillade our neighbour Gerald had rained upon our same door recently. Gerald, who'd lived next to us for the past ten years, and who once or twice slept off benders on our Lilliputian front lawn, his body sprawled on our six-by-six yellow-green patchwork of sod, hand rooted in the soil under our kitchen window exploding with black-eyed Susans and tiger lilies. At dawn, these flowers awoke with tiny, clenched fists, petals uncurling like fingers as the sun rose, blossoms open as beggars' palms.

Gerald had come to our door one muggy June evening a couple of weeks earlier, pounding on it and calling for my brother: "I know you're in there. Open up!" My brother opened a space just wide enough to thrust a hand in where Gerald shoved a piece of paper. It was a handwritten letter that looked like it had been crumpled at least once before being smoothed out. "You think I'm in the Mafia?" Gerald waved the letter, his wrist bouncing furiously in the space between door and frame: "Living in a slum like this? With a lunatic like you living next door? Crazy bastard!"

Gerald pulled his letter back out and stormed home, violently slamming his own door. My brother turned away, his face ashen. He locked our door, turning the deadbolt slowly and carefully, so it wouldn't make any clicking sound. He slumped against the door, exhausted, sweat beading on his forehead.

I asked him what he'd written. My brother immediately straightened up, grew animated and indignant. He said that he'd told Gerald to stop spying on him and to tell his mob higher-ups to leave him alone, that he'd done nothing wrong and that he didn't deserve to be killed.

My brother had come into my bedroom late one night with a sheaf of dog-eared papers clutched in his white-knuckled hand. He was wearing

the same shirt he'd worn for days. His hair was mussed from running his fingers through it and his eyes were wide as snapped blinds—I wondered if he slept at all anymore, since I'd hear him pacing all night, every night, wall to wall, corner to corner, floor to floor, moonrise to sunrise.

He presented these papers to me as evidence: worn, crumpled, smoothed, folded and unfolded, taken everywhere like love letters—except these weren't love letters, these were pages and pages of license plate numbers. There were probably a couple of hundred, and written not in my brother's familiar handwriting—his hieroglyphic scrawl I'd recognize in an instant—but in a cautious, new and neat primary grade-style penmanship. It was as if he wanted no mistake to be made in the recognition of each letter and number. The urgent pressure he applied to his pen etched ghostly tributaries on the reverse of every page.

He switched off my bedroom light and went to my window, lowering his head to its left corner, inching up just enough to see outside. "Never look out at night with your lights on," he'd cautioned me. "Switch them off so they can't see." He retreated from the window, inching downward and away, not wanting to startle his stakeout with sudden movements—even through impenetrable layers of bricks and concrete.

He finally straightened up fully and switched my light back on, not with a careless flick like he used to—like everyone does—but by guiding the switch, holding it between his index finger and thumb to set it in place without a sound. Our place was probably bugged, he'd said.

He came over to me. "That's *them*." He jabbed his pages urgently. He'd been sitting in the parking lot of the local convenience store for hours over the last few nights, taking down the plate numbers of every car that stopped long enough.

"But at a neighbourhood store like that, wouldn't you expect to see the same cars over and over?" I asked, I thought, logically.

My brother looked at me, gravely serious and said: "No way. That's too easy. Too obvious. That's what *they* want you to think."

Downstairs, the sheriff kept knocking. We'd received an eviction notice: an official-looking document with the arterial red seal dentata of the sheriff's office beside his spiked signature with its tall, hard consonants. My brother reassured me that they'd never come, that this would never happen.

“They can’t throw you out,” he told me. “You’re legally an orphan and still in high school.”

I heard the distant jingling of keys, and a solid click as our deadbolt slid back. The sheriff came inside, calling “Hello?” and “Anybody home?”

Footsteps dispersing, thuds moving toward far walls, branching in different directions. There were footsteps of several people; I guessed that the sheriff had brought along deputies.

They began downstairs. I heard doors open and close, low voices murmuring, occasionally calling: “Hello?” and “Anyone home?” Creaks of hinges; percussion of distant, insistent knocks.

Lately my brother had been begging me to meet him at the bus stop when he came home after dark. The Mafia wouldn’t kill an innocent kid, he believed, so he felt safer with me around. He always wanted to meet at hours past the strict curfew he’d once set for me—where, as my guardian in a sane and past life—he’d never have allowed me outside alone.

I’d always go where he asked me, even though I knew he had nothing to fear. I’d seen enough on movies and TV to know the mob doesn’t mess around, that they’d never bother playing cat-and-mouse with someone innocent like my brother. What’d he do? Nothing. I was certain. He was the most law-abiding person I knew—he make sure no cops were around before jaywalking, even. When I questioned him, he shushed me, putting his index finger to his lips. He told me to lower my voice and whispered that he really didn’t know why they were after him, and if he did, he’d tell me right away.

I tried to reassure him that the mob surely had bigger concrete shoes to cast into Lake Ontario, fatter necks to crush, meatier carcasses to torture in abandoned warehouses. Didn’t he watch those shows with me, the ones with the bad guys? Did they have the time and manpower to torment a poor student like him around the clock for weeks, for nothing that he even knew of? It was crazy. These people were sharper than that. They had to be.

Close to midnight, I’d pick my way through the warm darkness of those summer nights to wait for his bus, alone except for the black void of a starless sky hanging over me. At last, my brother’s bus emerged over the hill. As it came closer, I could see him hovering anxiously by the driver.

We’d walk home quietly, saying little. I don’t think he wanted them to hear us talking. They could have bugged the bus stop, our pathways home. They were always listening. It was hard for me to understand why they’d bother. My brother would thank me for meeting him in his new, soft voice.

He said he knew it was late and that I was tired, and it was true—we both were exhausted. They were completely wearing him down.

The sheriff and his deputies descended the wooden steps leading to our cellar. I listened to their distant “Hellos?” before they returned to the main floor, where they paused. Their murmuring hummed upwards through the heating vents. Their feet moved again; the floorboards creaked. Their footsteps came closer. They started upstairs. Many thumps on the steps—new sounds. All together, staccato, too close to count. The stair’s wooden overhangs groaned under the weight of these heavysset, middle-aged men.

They checked the other bedrooms—my brother’s first. A tap at his door before it creaked open, and seconds later another rap, then the familiar whoosh of his closet door folding open. Next they knocked at the door of our mother’s room and went in: another distant knock and the squeaky wail of her closet opening. “No one? No one?” someone said.

They finally arrived at my bedroom and I felt their presence a few feet away, only a flimsy slab of fiberboard between us.

There was a knock at my door and a brief pause before it opened. The sheriff poked his head in slowly. He spotted the pale moon of my face on the floor, peeking out the top of my sleeping bag.

“Hold it!” he said, bracing the doorway with his arms to keep everyone back. “There’s a little girl in here!”

There was a murmur as he turned away. He must have nodded at the lone woman in the group. She stepped past the sheriff and came into my room, taking slow steps.

“Hello,” she said.

“Get out.”

“Anyone else home?” The sheriff shouldered his way in. He looked hard at me for a moment, then addressed a spot on the wall above my head. “We’re serving an order of eviction,” he informed the wall.

“Do you have somewhere to go?” the social worker asked me gently.

“No. I’m staying here,” I said, and pulled the sleeping bag right up to my chin.

“You have to leave, young lady,” the sheriff said gruffly, then added glumly: “Movers are on their way.”

I crawled out of my sleeping bag. “Are you the only one home?” he asked.

“Yes,” I hissed.

The sheriff turned and left my room, thumping downstairs. The social worker stayed with me; deputies, several thick, stood outside my door. I stuffed a plastic shopping bag with a few necessities as the social worker kept sympathetic eyes on me. I brushed past her and waded through the deputies, heading downstairs.

The sheriff was in our kitchen, using our phone. I figured he was calling someone about me. Whatever was happening here, right now was like whatever had happened to my brother: he'd been hustled out of himself. He was still walking around, living, being, watching through the same eyes, looking out the same windows, looking otherwise the same in his old skin, but nothing else was the same. Someone else had moved in. He'd left himself. He'd left me. He'd left his lights burning. Would he ever come back? As he was? I knew I'd never come back here again.

As I slammed our back door for the last time, I heard the sheriff say: "Now what the hell am I supposed to do with this little girl?"