



Booth

Volume 5 | Issue 11

Article 3

11-15-2013

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Jacob M. Appel

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Recommended Citation

Appel, Jacob M. (2013) "Some Helpful Background for the Incoming Tenant," *Booth*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 11 , Article 3.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol5/iss11/3>

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Some Helpful Background for the Incoming Tenant

Abstract

If you are reading this note, I am most likely dead and you are the new tenant or tenants at #172B Meriwether Terrace. Under the circumstances, I'm sure you'll forgive me for taking the liberty of sharing some historical information about your future home, which was my former home, and before that belonged to a deranged postal worker who went to the loony bin for hoarding undelivered mail. After all, if you've found this letter, it means you were poking around beneath the shelving paper, probably searching for a suicide note or dirty pictures or whatever. Well, you can stop searching—for a suicide note, that is. Because I didn't leave one. Unless you count this memo, which you shouldn't, since I'm writing this for your benefit, not for mine. To give you context. A person only writes a suicide note if she has someone she wants to leave a message for—someone she knows personally, I mean— and the sad reality is that I don't. Not even a cat. Of course, I do realize that I'm not the first fifty-eight year old woman to drink a gallon of bleach on account of a man, although I do think I've had better reasons than most. But like I said, this isn't about me...

Keywords

fiction, duplex

Cover Page Footnote

"Some Helpful Background for the Incoming Tenant" was originally published at *Booth*.



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A JOURNAL

November 15, 2013

Some Helpful Background for the Incoming Tenant

Fiction by Jacob M. Appel

If you are reading this note, I am most likely dead and you are the new tenant or tenants at #172B Meriwether Terrace. Under the circumstances, I'm sure you'll forgive me for taking the liberty of sharing some historical information about your future home, which was my former home, and before that belonged to a deranged postal worker who went to the loony bin for hoarding undelivered mail. After all, if you've found this letter, it means you were poking around beneath the shelving paper, probably searching for a suicide note or dirty pictures or whatever. Well, you can stop searching—for a suicide note, that is. Because I didn't leave one. Unless you count this memo, which you shouldn't, since I'm writing this for your benefit, not for mine. To give you context. A person only writes a suicide note if she has someone she wants to leave a message for—someone she knows personally, I mean—and the sad reality is that I don't. Not even a cat. Of course, I do realize that I'm not the first fifty-eight year old woman to drink a gallon of bleach on account of a man, although I do think I've had better reasons than most. But like I said, this isn't about me...

Anyway.

So I'm going to assume that you're from Pontefract, or at least that you know something about the place, because nobody seems to move *to* Pontefract these days. I read somewhere that the entire state of Rhode Island is shrinking five percent a decade—that at the rate we're going, there will be fewer people here in two hundred years than there were when Roger Williams founded the place. Yet on the one-in-one-thousand chance that you've actually relocated here from somewhere else, and you want to learn about the town, you can find out more than you'd ever want to know at the Bristol County Historical Society—just remember that they have very limited hours. And if you're already from here, or if you're not from here but you don't particularly give a damn about the Pilgrim Fathers and the golden age of deep-ocean whaling, then you can forget about all of that. What you should keep in mind, either way, is that you've moved into a duplex, which isn't anything like living in an ordinary private residence. It's more like sharing a hospital room or camping together on the back of a giant fish. Nobody warned me about that thirty-nine years ago when I signed my name to the lease. So that's why I'm giving you a heads-up.

Truth of the matter is I was a naïve kid when my aunt and uncle moved me into this house—the kind of girl who thinks that life is fair, and love runs smooth, and girls who work as church secretaries marry handsome young ministers who speak like they've stepped out of Jane Austen novels. That's what I did back then: I did typing for the First Congregational Church on Oxbow Street. But I never wanted to marry a minister. I wanted to marry Aaron Sucram, who'd been three classes ahead of me at Barrington High School, and played a dashing George Gibbs in his senior class production of *Our Town*, and had been dating a skeleton of a creature named Marcy Hopkins for as long as I'd known him. I figured I'd have my chance when they split up. And everybody *swore* they were going to split up. Aaron was off to college in Connecticut, after all, and nobody really thought a Yale man would stick

with a high school junior. So I bided my time. Aaron and I weren't really friends, and we didn't have friends in common, but his father submitted all of his accomplishments to the *Pontefract Clarion*, so I knew when he won a chemistry prize and when he made phi beta kappa—and later when he sideswiped a fire truck in his father's Oldsmobile Cutlass. The article about the accident reported he'd been driving alone, at nine p.m. on a Friday, so I took that as a good sign, an indication things weren't going well with scrawny Marcy—and then, out of the blue, he up and married her. I remember the pain of reading their wedding announcement in the *Clarion* as though it was yesterday, and thinking what nerve they had! If I'd married Aaron, I'd have *wanted* to let the world know too, obviously, but I'd have had the decency to hold myself back. *Never* would I have rubbed my victory in Marcy's bony face the way she did to me with that piece in the newspaper. That's just not the kind of person I am. But the reason I'm telling you all this is so you get a sense of how heartbroken and vulnerable I was when I first moved into #172B and met Sebastian.

Sebastian and Alice weren't living in #172A when I first moved in. My lease started in July and they didn't arrive until the following May. Before that, my neighbors were an elderly woman and her disabled adult son. The son wore a plastic helmet. I'd hardly have known they existed, except some of their mail was delivered to my box by mistake. Nothing interesting—just a few outstanding bills and a package from a distant cousin embarking on genealogy project: The cousin actually included a hand-drawn family tree in the envelope and asked them to return it to her with additions and corrections. But then a moving van appeared one afternoon and the pair of them vanished. Two weeks later, while I was sitting opposite the bay window, Sebastian and Alice parked at the curbside. They drove separate cars, Sebastian's Corvette leading. He carried a cardboard box up the front steps, his shirt matted to his chest with sweat—the handsomest man in the universe with his sharp jaw and towering forehead—and I'll never forget promising myself, at that very instant, *I'm going to marry that man*

someday. This was before I knew he was married to Alice.

At first, I didn't even have the courage to introduce myself to Sebastian. I've never been a particularly sociable person—that's what comes of being orphaned as a toddler, I guess, and it didn't help that my aunt and uncle came from the variety of Puritan Yankee stock who could go an entire supper without uttering a three-word sentence—but I did manage to learn a considerable amount about the Carranos from afar. That was Alice and Sebastian's last name: "Carrano." A label punched onto red embossing tape appeared above their mailbox, replacing Mrs. Delacroix's hand-scrawled tag, and I found myself fantasizing that my new neighbor was a wild Latin lover in the mold of Rudolf Valentino. In reality, Sebastian Carrano conducted the orchestra at Pontefract Middle School, where Alice taught math, and he supplemented their income giving private voice lessons to adults. After I lost my job at the church on account of my nerves, and went out on disability, one of my greatest pleasure was listening to Sebastian's students in the late afternoon. The lessons began around four o'clock most weekdays, and for two to three hours, my parlor filled with music—everything from show tunes to arias from *Tosca* and *Carmen*. One woman even sang Rosemary Clooney's "Come On-A My House" over and over again each Monday afternoon until I'd memorized the lyrics—and you'd have thought Rosemary herself had relocated to Pontefract. Needless to say, some of the singers had more talented than others. And I couldn't actually hear Sebastian's instruction through the wall. But I loved *imagining* him coaching these middle-aged women—and nearly all of his students were middle-aged women—loved picturing him flaring his baton while tiny beads of perspiration sprang up on his perfect bronze brow.

We might have carried on like this for a long time—I might *never* have built up the courage to introduce myself—except, after I went out on disability, my aunt bought me an electric sewing machine "to keep my hands busy." That was Aunt Hannah's mantra: *Busy hands are happy*

hands and an idle mind is the devil's workshop. I accepted the machine to humor her, as I had no intention of doing my own stitching, let alone anybody else's, but I did plug the machine into an outlet in my parlor...and the entire first floor went dark. Not only my own first floor, it turned out, but also the Carrano's: the singing next door stopped, and about ten minutes later, Sebastian Carrano appeared at my door in a plaid shirt and chinos.

"Looks like we've blown a fuse," said Sebastian. "If I ever buy my own home, first thing I'm going to do is put in circuit breakers." He held up a bright orange plug and it took me a moment to realize this was a replacement fuse—not an exotic musical accoutrement. "We haven't actually met," he added, extending a hand. "Sebastian Carrano. My wife and I live next door."

So he replaced the fuse and that was that. Twenty minutes later, the lights were back on and the parlor again filled with an upbeat rendition of "You Can't Get a Man with a Gun." And I was sadly disappointed. I suppose I thought that once the ice between us had been shattered, I'd become a regular in the Carrano's home—that Sebastian would invite me to dinner...and that one thing might lead to another. But all I actually got was a brand new fuse and the cold shoulder.

So I *made* myself a regular in Sebastian's home. I don't know how the idea first came to me, but I found a hand drill at the hardware store on Steeple Street, and I bored a fine hole into the plaster between my parlor and Sebastian's conservatory. The hole proved just wide enough to afford a view of the piano and the nearby music stand—thank heavens, I didn't end up behind a bookcase or something—and, on my end, the opening was easy to conceal behind a flap of wallpaper. The following Monday afternoon, when the buxom brunette named Bonnie arrived to croon "Come On-A My House," I had the lights off and a stool perched at my peephole.

I'll confess I was somewhat surprised when Sebastian kissed his student on the lips and even more surprised when he turned on a cassette player. At first, I thought the recording was merely a prelude to the lesson—a model for Buxom Bonnie to imitate. But then the more intimate sounds from beyond my line-of-sight told me the rest of the story: The voice I'd been hearing on Monday afternoons *was* Rosemary Clooney. Sebastian Carrano had recorded voice lessons to mislead his wife while he and Buxom Bonnie performed a different sort of music. And I had to hand it to him: He'd spliced the tape in such a clever way that it genuinely sounded like a voice lesson. Another few years elapsed before I learned *why* he hadn't just recorded Buxom Bonnie herself: At the end of one of their "lessons," she confessed with a laugh that she couldn't carry a tune.

Anyway.

Buxom Bonnie wasn't the only middle-aged matron whose "voice lessons" Sebastian had pre-recorded. He also "taught" a mousy lady with a penchant for torch songs and a rail-thin Black woman named Hortensia whose voice proved a dead ringer for Sarah Vaughan—although with these women, he actually pre-recorded their own voices. But I don't want you to get the wrong idea: Sebastian offered real lessons too—most of his lessons, in fact, were of the traditional sort—and these were thrilling to see. He'd sit at the piano, lost in the music, his face a torment of ecstasy. After watching him for five minutes, I couldn't imagine how I'd ever loved Aaron Sucram.

Of course, I secretly dreamed of something more. But as with Aaron, I bided my time—bided it so long that somehow thirty-eight years evaporated. Uncle Ethan burst an aneurysm; Aunt Hannah died in a nursing home in Providence. Alice Carrano's hair turned from black to steel-gray. One Monday afternoon, crouched at my perch at four o'clock, I found Buxom Bonnie had been replaced by a teenage girl who

actually did her own singing. Yet Sebastian managed to find another lover for his five-thirty slot, a morbidly obese peroxide blonde in her fifties. He remained as dashing in his early-sixties as he'd been in his late twenties: still trim and his skin as bronze as ever. He never managed to buy that home with a circuit breaker, but one day his lessons started at one o'clock in the afternoon, and I realized that he'd retired from the middle school. And what did *I* do all those years? Other than biding my time, that is. Honestly, I can't really tell you. I'd like to say that I mastered a dozen foreign languages, or painted an attic's worth of breathtaking canvases, or even taught myself how to embroider, so that I could ornament throw pillows like Aunt Hannah's—but I did nothing of the sort. I just minded my own business, and kept on good terms with the grocery clerks, and waited for my opportunity with Sebastian. I suppose it's rather sad really. But no matter.

I mention all of this because it might explain how my life suddenly veered off the rail at fifty-eight. I was flipping through the *Clarion* one Friday morning—it was a daily paper when I first moved in, but now it's only a weekly—and I turned first to the obituaries, as I always do, to see if I recognized anyone from high school. And there was the name Marcy Sucram: Marcy Sucram *née* Hopkins, 59, of Creve Coeur, survived by husband, Aaron, and Lord-knows-how-many children and grandchildren. Somehow thinking of scrawny Marcy Hopkins dead of pancreatic cancer left me raw with anxiety, as though I'd been sent a warning to act before I too was just a four inch column on page seventeen of the *Clarion*.

So that very afternoon, fortified with three snifters of Uncle Ethan's brandy, I marched across the porch, rang Sebastian's bell, and informed him that I wanted to sign up for voice lessons. He appeared shocked, at first, but his three o'clock appointment had cancelled, and—to my utter amazement—he immediately ushered me into the same conservatory where I had watched his life unfold for decades. The room seemed so much smaller from the inside, but I found myself thinking, *I'm really*

standing in Sebastian's conservatory, really touching his music stand. On the far side of the room stood a glass coffee table topped with a vase of fresh irises and a plush sofa that likely folded into a bed.

“So what kind of music would you like to sing?” asked Sebastian.

I stared at him blankly.

“Miss Cabot,” said Sebastian. “Are you all right?”

Somehow I managed to collect myself. “I’m fine, really,” I said. “It’s just...well...I was hoping to have the other kind of lessons...The kind that Bonnie and Hortensia used to have...”

A surge of intensity swept across Sebastian’s features, as though all of his facial muscles had tightened simultaneously, and I’ll confess I found the look magnetic—although, in hindsight, I now recognize that this may have been an expression of dismay, or a sentiment even worse. Yet the expression quickly melted back into a smile.

“Certainly,” said Sebastian, matter-of-fact. “That’s fine. Of course, the rate for that sort of specialized lesson is higher. Much higher.”

“I see,” I said.

But I didn’t see at all.

In all those years, you understand, it had never entered my naïve head that Sebastian was *charging* these women to make use of his sofa

bed. Never in my wildest nightmares could I have imagined being so insulted—even Marcy and Aaron’s wedding announcement paled in comparison. As I hurried through the foyer, I caught sight of Alice Carrano carrying a stack of fresh towels up the stairs, and I had half a mind to tell her what sort of voice lessons her husband had been offering. But I didn’t. Not then.

No, I bided my time. And the following Tuesday, after making certain that Alice Carrano was still home, I waited until Sarah Vaughan hit the high notes in “If You Could See Me Now,” and then I jammed the plug of Aunt Hannah’s sewing machine into the socket. As I had hoped, the music died instantly—replaced briefly by the loud moans of the enormous peroxide blonde. After that, everything developed exactly as I’d imagined it: the pounding on the conservatory door, Alice’s shouting, the obese woman storming down the front steps with a face as red as a toy wagon.

Or everything had developed *almost* as I’d imagined it. In my fantasy, Alice walked out on Sebastian and I dropped in next door to comfort him. What actually happened, I was totally unprepared for: The singing lessons stopped, and after a few weeks, I realized that Alice Carrano was living alone in #172A. I didn’t dare ask her where Sebastian had gone—didn’t dare ask her anything at all. And then last Friday, a moving van pulled up and carted off their things. I remember watching the men hauling the piano down the steps and thinking how badly my life had turned out...

Anyway.

So that’s how both halves of #172 came to be vacant simultaneously.

I do hope this context is somewhat helpful to you. Other than this history, it's a rather ordinary house. You'll find you get your best sunlight in the morning, especially in the downstairs parlor. And the washing machine sometimes needs a good slap on the side to shift it from rinse to spin; I'm sorry I won't be here to show you the exact spot, but I'm sure you'll get the hang of it. All it takes is time and patience.

Jacob M. Appel is the author of the recently released novel, *The Biology of Luck*, and the forthcoming short story collection, *Scouting for the Reaper*. He practices medicine in New York City. more at: www.jacobmappel.com