Mee Ok Icaro

Rear Window

In Brookline, a Boston suburb so affluent you practically need a PhD to live there, a brick building sits, unremarkable in every way except for its size: it spans two full blocks and stands five stories tall. From the top floor, choppy waves of gambrel and Victorian rooftops flow out toward the hazy hills; in the distance, a few steeples stab the sky. And on the ground, a playground swings, plays tag, and scores baskets before resting for the evening, its expensive toys dreaming in the night shadows, unafraid of being stolen. From a place that may or may not be real, a piano strokes out the notes of a Dvořák sonata, and they float over the rows of stately homes with their manicured lawns and exotic vegetation.

Then there's our building, expansive and manufactured, with its mummed and pansied gardens doing their best impression of a grandma's front yard. And next to the gardens, a population curious for these parts: the elderly with canes and walkers, young people in wheelchairs, and the ambulating poor, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, their faces reflecting the serenity of someone inhaling a gulp of fresh, apexed air. We are a "mixed use" Section 8 building, government housing without targeted restrictions, like being over fifty-five or having HIV. Translation: we are largely a collection of elderly Russian Jewish émigrés, disabled people, and impoverished blacks and whites, mostly ignored by our NIMBY, neoliberal neighbors.

I am the exception: in my thirties, Korean, adopted, alone. I moved in during the summer of 2012 from the hospice floor of a nursing home to live out the rest of my days. After depleting my options with Western medicine, I turned to a hallucinogenic tea from South America that dramatically improved my health, though I still remained disabled, and I began to slowly meet people again.

Three of the four black people I have known in our building were once in show business: a 1970s blaxploitation actor who only recently came out

of the closet, an impossibly beautiful stage actress from the 1960s, and a former backup singer for Patti LaBelle, who sends him a birthday cake every year.

The fourth black neighbor is Iris. Well, black if you don't count the Irish and two Native American grandparents, one Pequot and one Narragansett. At eighty-six, she looks younger than the daughter she recently lost to drug addiction not so long ago. She herself recently gave up smoking and stopped drinking wine, but you'd never guess she had any vices, given her spry step and the delicate creases lining her face. She is the mother hen of the place, if it can be said there is one, having lived in the building for three decades— when another ninety-year-old neighbor with the ninety-year-old name of Doris first initiated affordable housing here.

Born in 1933, Iris remembers having gained the right to eat in restaurants. "My mother got on the *bus*," she says, "to ride all the way downtown so that she could go into the Checker Smoker diner over on Dover and drink a cup of coffee at the countertop. Because, you know, we couldn't." Her hands plead to me, "We didn't have the damn money to be taking a bus!" As her arms fall to her side, she laughs and shakes her head, before becoming a daughter for a moment. "But there was no stopping Mom . . ."

I often see Iris in our newly revamped common area. The downstairs lobby is as basic as it always was—a tiny mailroom and laundry room for our packages and clothes to be stolen, and a small area with a wall made of windows that feels like a waiting room. It just looks nicer now—less prison and more like a finished basement. The recent renovations sparked whispers about the building moving to private housing—and us moving out into the street.

In the afternoons Iris regularly sits with two lesbian neighbors bound by companionship and separated by a generation. The younger of the two has a seeing-eye dog and the kind of large, square sunglasses I normally associate with older women wearing mall-nostalgic tracksuits. The older of the two is the niece of famed composer and Bertolt Brecht collaborator Kurt Weill. She pronounces Kurt, "Koort," in a perfect Berliner accent. On a sponsored trip to the Museum of Fine Arts, she spills the insider-scoop on the family infighting, the Kurt Weill Foundation, and the museum-bound memorabilia she still has yet to rummage through. *Oh, the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear . . . And it shows them pearly white . . .*

But now I have only spoken of the Americans.

Over half the building is filled with Russian Jewish émigrés from another era. Small in stature and mostly unable to communicate in English,

they have their own secret community—out in the open. Their wealth ranges from apartments crowded with exquisite art and furniture—marble busts and lacquered armoires, like French-inspired characters pulled straight from a drawing room in a Tolstoy novel—to sparse and shaken spaces with all the charm of Dostoyevsky's basement.

Genia, an ancient woman who was never to exceed five feet in height and lives in a simple apartment down the hall, acts as my Soviet Virgil to this world. Her mellifluous voice carries the sweetness and melancholy of the Cold War, with W's that can't help but be V's and L's that double as W's. When I enter her apartment, it is nearly as empty as her refrigerator. "Would you like some water?" she asks, wanting to offer me something—anything—before interrupting herself. "Ah! I have chocolates that Sasha gave me. Can I give to you some chocolate?" I insist that I'm fine, then insist some more before she relents. "So tell me how are you?" she asks. "How is the book? I am waiting." She smiles with a tooth now missing.

"Book is coming," I assure her. "I am working hard."

"You will tell me." She looks me over like I'm all dressed up with somewhere to go even though I am wearing my pajamas. "And you walk now very good. You look much better," she says, her accent thick and grandmotherly. "You know, when I first saw you I knew you would walk again."

This surprises me. For years I knew not a single neighbor, leaving my apartment only by gurney, back and forth to various hospitals and specialists, transported by ambulance and a fading desire to live. My doctors had told me I would never walk again—I was due to expire in less than a year, by 2016.

"I am . . . what is the word?" she points to her temple, her hand like a woodpecker, over and over as if to break through. "I know, even before I pick up, who calls me."

"Psychic?"

"Ah yes! *Psychic.*" She nods furiously. "Even when you are laying down and they come to take you to hospital, I knew"—she assumes a significant expression—"Yes, you will walk again."

Sitting in her dark apartment as the train rumbles by just outside, she tells me about her past as a scientist. They're all scientists. "Misha ran her own lab. I had my own lab. Everyone had their own lab," she reminisces without sentimentality. Later she takes me down to meet the oldest man in the building, Alyosha.

He looks like a good friend of mine, a New York comic, if we fast forwarded literally sixty years. I always see him riding his bike everywhere, this man even Genia's senior. He is thin and shrunken but made taller by the black fez that never leaves his head. His apartment is clut-

tered with hardly any space to stand. Books stacked on every surface, taller than any of us. He speaks Russian—and quickly.

"He says he would like to show you how he keep his health," Genia translates. "He rides his bike because he cannot walk," she explains as he points to his hips. "He is 98." I nod, marveling. *Damn.* Certainly, he is healthier than I am. He proceeds to show me a routine in which he pokes at various points of his body, like a self-taught acupressurist. "He says do this every day, twice a day, to keep out poison."

Poison?

"He was scientist in Russia. But he had . . . what do you call? Very bad poison," she repeats. They shoot back and forth in Russian, leaving me with the feeling that I have accidentally made a wrong turn in some old-world village. "He was very big scientist. Smarter than the rest of us." He becomes animated now as words fly out of his Cyrillic mouth. "Ah! Now he is asking, do you know Chernobyl?"

Holy shit! Chernobyl?!

They look at me with wide grins. "This is why he know how to take care of health," Genia explains. "He is only one living, we think."

Christ, I realize. *He's going to outlive me.*

In this building, people don't move out—they pass on. By my count, I lose, on average, two neighbors a year on my floor alone. My favorite was a ninety-three-year-old named Vivian, always impeccably dressed and out the door for her volunteer work by 9 AM every day. "What's the secret?" I once asked her, as I hobbled down the hallway for my daily "stroll." She paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Eat well, get enough sleep"—she glanced around to make sure we were alone—"and don't let the bastards get to ya."

My least favorite neighbor to pass was Bill. I'd often see him in his wheelchair speeding down the hallway—hair graying, body thinning, and his albino mutt trotting beside him, riddled with tumors. Though occasionally friendly, most of the time he would ignore me as he rolled by, cigar in hand, to the elevator. Then one day, he was gone.

Bridie, a robust elderly woman so Irish she sounded like the mother of the Lucky Charms leprechaun, was teary-eyed one morning as she told me the news. "That poor fool. I take that little dog for a walk at 8:30 every morning because he's always too drunk to do it. But this morning, Bill was gone." She wiped her eyes. "I told him he was a fool, but he just couldn't keep his dumb mouth shut."

Apparently Bill and Iris had gotten into a row over something months

before, and in a heated moment of graceless offense he called her the N-word. After Iris reported him, he was given sixty days to vacate the premises and he had nowhere to live. He drank himself to death, preferring to leave his body than his apartment.

"I'm sorry a man died," Iris shook her head. "But I'll be damned if someone thinks they can say those things to me—to anyone—and get away with it." She shrugs. "I do hope he's found some peace."

"I just feel so bad for that dog," Bridie added with a sniffle.

There are two Catholics on my floor. One is a retired nun and schoolmaster, shaped like a five-foot brick, who says things like, *New neighbors in 514—the wrong kind . . . if you know what I mean*, before vanishing down the hall, like a thread of smoke. Then there's Bridie, whose devotion to Catholicism rivals only her love of animals. The only time I would see her was when she was walking her cat in the lobby or on her way to the century-old church down the street. But even when she was still in stellar physical health, evidence of her waning mind was well in effect. Whenever she would see my dog, a friendly mini-dachshund, she would ask me—every time—if I had ever heard the song by Elvis about his little pup Shep?

Sometimes I would say no, sometimes yes. No matter. Every time she would recite its opening lines like a Celtic bard:

When I was a lad
And old Shep was a pup
Over hills and meadows we'd stray
Just a boy and his dog
We were both full of fun
We grew up together that way

Over the years I have witnessed her body decline, struggling with a cane, now a walker, shuffling to the park to feed the birds and squirrels or inching toward the elevator with her groceries. She hasn't been the same since her hip surgery, which she wisely put off for as long as she could. Somehow, it occurs to me, we passed one another like two broken ships in the night: as she lost her legs, I found mine. But still, whenever she sees me, her hip-swiveling rock star is never far from her mind. And always, when I think of her, I hear her lovely Irish lilt ask, "Do you like Elvis?"

Back at Genia's apartment, she wonders how I managed to walk again. In turn, I ask her, skeptically, if she's ever heard of the Amazonian medicine called ayahuasca?

“Excuse me,” she apologizes, hand over heart. “My English is not so good . . .”

“No, no,” I assure her. “Ayahuasca is not an English word and most people here don’t know it either.”

“Uh huh, but so it is a pill?” she asks in her child’s voice.

“It’s a tea . . .” I begin, wondering how I’m going to explain that I’ve been drinking the most potent psychedelic on the planet to cure my autoimmune disease. But hey, since we’re already down the rabbit hole—“when you drink it, you see—do you believe in God?”

“No, I am Jewish, but I never go to synagogue. I am bad Jew,” she laughs. “Maybe I will drink this tea? Where I can buy?”

“Oh yeah, it’s not that kind of tea,” I backpedal. “It um . . . it takes you into your mind. Do you know LSD?”

“Ahhhh . . .” she nods knowingly, mysteriously. “You know what? I was youngest PhD in St. Petersburg. Twenty-six years old.” She pauses proudly, importantly. I am indeed impressed. She continues to tell me that shortly after graduating, some plainclothesmen showed up at her doorstep and asked her to come with them. Turns out they were KGB and she was recruited with nine other scientists, all men, to participate in a top-secret LSD study in the 1950s, experimenting on mice. “Every day we would go in and they had so much, uh, excuse me . . .” She motions as if rummaging through a bag and being patted down. “Nothing go in and nothing come out, you understand.”

“I can imagine,” I imagine. “I bet the security was insane.”

“Yes, insane,” she repeats. “But do you know what? There was one place they never check.” She motions toward her cleavage. “Excuse me. You understand?”

“Amazing,” I grin and stare wide-eyed at this tiny woman.

“One day—it was a Friday—I put like this”—she motions as if to slip something between her breasts—“and I go home. They never catch.” She is giddy and mischievous. She is twenty-six years old again.

“Holy shit! Did you take it?”

She nods. “That night I take.” She drops an imaginary tab in her mouth in front of me. “And for twenty hours I am everywhere. I don’t know . . . what is this? But after that I understand what no Russian can ever know. And I never, ever forget.” Then she leans in and whispers, “First time I ever leave St. Petersburg.”

We sit in silent awe together knowing that, soon, there will be a last time we leave Brookline. The closer the specter of death, the sweeter, more absurd, and painfully profound each moment becomes. Then I bid

her goodnight and make my way back down the barren hallway, a ghost half her age, holding so close to me the stories of the living. I hear Iris's voice echo from earlier that morning, "You know this building is up for renewal in 2027. I'm not sure where we're all supposed to go after that." Her worried hands comfort themselves instead of reaching for a cigarette. *But by then, most of us won't be here anyway*, I think but don't say. Then I turn to look out the rear window of the building, reminded from our aerie floor, high above the treetops, that we are so very close to the sky.