

THE SMELL

After many years living in the same apartment I began to notice a smell. It first came to me at night, during the lingering doldrums of early spring—a soft moist odour of decay, a milky aroma reminiscent of childhood and interminable summer evenings at home, of mosquitoes and the damp swampy soil of my youth. It seemed to seep out of the walls and slither up the kitchen drain, to cling to the surface of objects, to rise from the back of the closet and into the lining of my clothes. For a few days I tried to ignore it, expecting it would go away of its own accord. Like many older structures, my building was prone to occasional breakdowns and minor system failures. Leaks were not unusual. And it *had* been raining a lot lately. So after some thought, I decided the smell could likely be attributed to a flooded sewer line, or perhaps to some custodial blunder that would be remedied in no more than a day or two. I didn't bother to complain.

I went to work and cooked my meals as usual. Each night I tried to convince myself that the mysterious odour was growing weaker, that the

mellow pungency of spoiled eggs intruded only as far as my dreams, that my life apart from this remained intact. I thought, I'm making too much of this, it really isn't so bad. I thought, any morning now I'll wake up and it will be gone.

But instead of fading the smell gained in strength and eventually carried itself through the night and into the day, persisting in the air like a noxious mist. And when it was still there a week later I began a frenzied search for the source within the apartment, rummaging through the contents of my cupboards, sliding furniture away from the walls, exploring the crevices of my upholstered sofa. I fully expected to come across a small dead animal, or some long-forgotten article of food, or a creeping fungus that had migrated into the floorboards and begun a process of rot. I prepared myself for the sight of some unfortunate object playing host to a writhing colony of worms. I even let myself imagine that someone had died in a neighbouring apartment and that the stench from the putrefying corpse was invading my rooms through a ventilation duct. The more I thought about it, this seemed a reasonable explanation. We've all heard about people who live their entire

lives within a few square meters, only to die alone and forgotten.

So with this in mind I spent the next few days loitering in the corridors, counting the occupants of each apartment adjoining mine—on either side, above and below—watching husbands and wives leave for work early in the morning and return home late at night, observing elderly residents lock their doors at noon and return a few hours later with bags full of groceries. But even though I made close observations, I saw nothing out of the ordinary. Every apartment delivered up at least one resident who appeared healthy and unperturbed. People roused themselves, greeted one another, and embarked upon their daily rituals as if everything were normal. When I finally went outside again—taking note of the change of season fast approaching, the unsettled air, the rising temperatures—the entire city seemed strangely free of smells, repugnant or otherwise, as if the streets had been freshly scrubbed and sanitized, as if people had found some reason to cultivate their day-to-day aromas only when hidden behind closed doors.

I consulted the landlady, a wiry old woman of pronounced military bearing, who arrived at my

door late one afternoon with a bucket and some rags. She sniffed the air and seemed to wrinkle her nose and then proceeded to instruct me in the art of keeping oneself and one's home in proper order. I admit the place was a mess. I'd fallen into the habit of conducting my investigations late at night, when the smell was at its most detestable, when it drifted throughout the apartment with a fetid urgency I can compare only to the grisly reek of gangrenous flesh. For the convenience of my search all the furniture was heaped together in the middle of the floor, and on this occasion I was engaged in a minute inspection of the perimeter baseboards, probing the darkened recess beneath each radiator with a popsicle stick. Here I'd discovered all manner of filth and debris, especially in the kitchen, where I located a thick deposit of gummy residue that I could safely assume predated my occupancy by some years. Many insects of the household variety had evidently sought their last refuge in this very place—beneath the radiator in the kitchen—only to become trapped in this gluey ooze and thereby preserved so that years later I could unearth their remains and gloat over the supremacy of my species. I used a plastic spatula to loosen the material from the floor,

bracing myself against a cabinet as I worked, letting the spatula nudge a few inches of the hardened substance upward at a time. However, in order to pry out the last bits with any degree of efficiency I had to use a screwdriver. And it was this I was clutching in my hand at the precise moment the landlady chose to put in her appearance.

She expressed little interest in what I'd been up to until after she completed her tirade about the virtues of keeping a neat and orderly house—and even then I couldn't get her to admit that she could smell anything even though her expression told me otherwise. But when I made a proud display of what I'd found—this strand of lumpy brown gunk dangling from the flattened head of the screwdriver—she quite suddenly grew pale and began making excuses, saying she had to go upstairs somewhere to fix a leaky faucet. In less than a minute she was gone. To her credit, she *did* leave behind the rags and the bucket together with some jumbled advice on how to eliminate stubborn odours. But I wasn't sorry to see her go. She clearly had no idea of the magnitude of my problem if she imagined it could be solved with a few rags and a bucket of soapy water.

The smell followed me to the office, creeping out from behind my divider and contaminating the entire workplace. I'd long suspected the inevitable—that my clothes would become steeped in this dank, foul, sickroom stench—and had taken the precaution of airing each suit outdoors on the balcony for a whole day before wearing it. But it didn't do any good. People I'd developed close friendships with began treating me like some sort of freak, keeping their distance, eyeing me with suspicion, choosing their words with scrupulous care as if afraid of making me angry. I noticed that almost everyone appeared preoccupied and began shuffling papers loudly whenever I approached. A few of them locked their doors. I blamed the smell, which hovered in the air around me, unseen but undeniable—an impenetrable cloud, a malodorous vapour that rendered me incapable of sharing in even the simplest rituals of civilized conduct, such as initiating conversation or looking people in the eye. It hadn't been very long since I was quite popular with everyone. At lunchtime I was always telling stories and making people laugh. But now I sat alone and tried to conceal my irritability. I kept telling myself if I could just work up the courage to talk to one person about something trivial, like the

weather, then I'd be okay. Everyone would see I was normal. But instead I kept my eyes to the ground and my mouth shut and wondered what would become of me.

The smell made me do other things. I began grumbling aloud to myself and making faces as it constricted my breathing and impinged upon my olfactory organs. I snuffled all day long as if stricken with a persistent nasal disorder. I could tell these developments made everyone seated in the vicinity of my desk uneasy. Perhaps they thought I was contagious. I can't say I blame them. But I was helpless to stifle these impulses, which came upon me quite suddenly. One day the administrator of my unit called me into his office and issued a stern warning. He said there had been some complaints and he advised me to shape up. I'd been preparing for this. I wanted to describe what was happening to someone who would understand and sympathize. But when the time came to speak I found it impossible to justify myself in rational terms. The smell was a mystery. I could neither explain it nor escape its odious influence. Its stagnant fumes were with me every minute of every day.

It wasn't long before I was asked to resign my post.



From my apartment I can look out over the city and marvel at the technological advances we've made. In the years since I first moved into this building I've spent many thoughtful hours sitting by the window or on the balcony, admiring the view, watching new construction going up, making plans and reflecting on the events in my life that brought me here. But this won't last much longer. With no job and no prospects I can anticipate losing my apartment very soon. I'm told there are offices filled with people who occupy their time keeping track of where we work and what our salaries are. The management company will receive notice that I've lost my job and I'll be told to leave. In preparation, I've been exploring a variety of low-rent alternatives. I won't be selling my belongings or taking them with me, the smell having infected them all with the syrupy rankness of over-ripe mangoes. So I won't need much space. And with the approach of warmer weather I won't mind living outdoors. The park is quite nice in summer, with benches to sit on and trees for

shelter, and down by the harbour there's a drainage pipe that may be to my taste. So I'm greatly encouraged. But that isn't all. As I wandered one day along the back roads near the container pier I discovered an abandoned warehouse. The vagrants and madmen who live there are generally quite agreeable. They seem willing to accept anyone into their midst as long as you're prepared to share your food and money with them. So when the time comes I can look forward to making my winter home among their company.

I'm sure they won't object to the smell.