

The Sixth Tier

I wonder what he does up there. All day long I hear him shuffling. Shuffling from one corner to another. And it sounds as if he's wearing socks woven from steel wool.

Perhaps he's breaking into my apartment, very deviously; sanding down the floorboards until one day (or most probably, one night) he'll fall through like a spider from a broken web.

Then he'll move right in, all his furniture – everything, on top of mine. And with me being such a passive person, we'll come to some arrangement whereby I have my own furniture removed, except for the bed and bedside cabinet, and he'll assume control of the domestic routine: clearing all his furniture out so he can sand down my floorboards until we both fall through on to the people downstairs.

And from there he'll continue all the way down, until he's assumed control of the entire building and all the inhabitants are crammed into the ground floor apartment, living like rats, subservient to his megalomania.

Still I can't help but wonder where he puts the furniture while he's sanding down the floorboards. In the hallway, perhaps? And what if he's already descended a few floors? There may well be other people up there with him, sitting unobtrusively in the corners of the rooms, bracing themselves for the next drop.

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I've been thinking of investing in a cat. I prefer cats to dogs as does my landlord, who prefers cats to people. It would make things more cosy. Cats are independent animals, unlike dogs who are unbearably servile. We could live our own lives, see our own friends, cohabit in harmonious independence. I would provide the milk and my cat

would supply the kinesis in my otherwise immobile surroundings. Cats are always calm, not frenetic or neurotic like dogs, or parrots, or hamsters, who are also insomniacs. Also, a cat is an excellent judge of character. A cat is very intuitive and astute. I have occasionally been mistaken in my judgements of other people but having a cat would reduce the margin of error, I'm sure.

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At my office we are always devising rackets. Our purpose is to swindle the company out of as much money as possible. I'm a paperclip and stationery man myself. I have boxes and boxes of paperclips and stationery in the closets in my apartment. Miss Klar is far more enterprising. She dismantles office furniture, desktop terminals, lighting fixtures – with her nailfile – which she reassembles in the privacy of her own home. She only removes a very small piece at a time, so as to avoid detection. A small square of veneer one day, a motherboard the next. The company suspects nothing.

In its turn our company attempts to extort from us as much work as possible, without resorting to physical intimidation, presumably; although from time to time a member of staff whose work is unsatisfactory will disappear, never to be seen again; this does give rise to morbid speculation.

At lunchtime we read newspapers and discuss current events, if there are any. I eat the food from the dispenser in the lobby although it's rumoured to be tampered with.

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When I woke up this morning I was covered in spots. Specifically, only my hand was covered in spots but my entire body felt sullied and invaded. At the foot of the bed

a spider sat languidly. We eyed each other like legendary adversaries. St George and The Spider. I had the distinct impression that my antagonist was curious about me but perhaps it was only my imagination. I ran him through with a hatpin I keep handy for such emergencies.

However, all day long I wondered how a spider could have entered the philosopher's egg of my apartment. The building is virtually airtight. The windows are sealed, the walls and ceiling coated with rubber or polyurethane, I think. Could it have come up the drain into my bathtub? My landlord had assured me that the drains were regularly patrolled. A mystery. I can't believe it.

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As I dressed, I looked at the photograph of my wife on the bedside cabinet. She hasn't changed at all, I thought. And I felt a twinge of my old melancholia. Those were the days, I thought. I wonder where she is now, I thought.

Since she left, the place has fallen into a state of irreversible decline. She was such an enthusiastic woman, always occupied with some project. She wasn't religious though, otherwise we would never have got on so well.

Since her departure a nauseating air of inertia has settled about the place. Nothing happens. Should I drop a glass while I'm washing the dishes the noise seems to reverberate for an hour afterwards, in every corner of every room, as if to establish incontrovertibly that there was a noise. Not someone else's noise, nor an imaginary noise such as one hears sometimes during the night.

And then there will follow a silence that will endure for days. These modern apartments are completely immune to alterations in humidity or atmospheric pressure, or the gradual subsidence of the ground below; so there are none of the personal sounds to disturb you, the kind of sounds one associates with old houses.

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My apartment is furnished in the ancient Japanese tradition, with the notable exception of the kitchen which is fitted with the customary occidental appliances. This dichotomy in my environment is necessitated by the scarcity of Oriental food in my neighbourhood. As I am obliged to subsist on Western fare it would be inappropriate to have a kitchen suitable for the highly refined cuisine favoured in the East.

My living room, however, has a more Spartan décor, inspired, as I say by the Oriental modes. I have dispensed with furniture completely, and have placed pieces of wood and lumps of stone in a random formation on the floor of the living room. These items convey the impression of furniture, without inhibiting my freedom of movement within the room.

I am too, very much a creature of habit, and perhaps this contributes to the inertia to which I've referred. I have established what I believe to be the most efficient and convenient regimen for living in this apartment. I have also developed a rather habituated taste in food and other household necessities, with the result that all the packages in the kitchen cupboards, and the food in the refrigerator, are usually of the same brand. When the manufacturers change or modernise their product packaging, it has quite an effect on my environment.

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For anyone who wishes to visit me I make certain concessions of course. My mother, for instance, brings a chair with her, or on more lethargic days, a settee, which she is at liberty to place wherever she likes – providing of course she doesn't disturb the arrangements of wood and stone. My mother appears rather contemptuous of my furnishings and often attempts to leave a chair with me despite my protestations. I

suspect however that her apparent concern for my welfare is tinged somewhat by expediency and she would prefer to avoid the fatiguing business of carrying the chair or settee with her from her home to my apartment each time she wishes to visit me.

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As the years went by my wife and I found fewer and fewer things to talk about. I was never particularly interested in anything. I had no hobbies, or extramural activities about which I could converse with her. Talking had always been a mere habit with me, and conversation an activity which I generally restricted to my working hours. I had virtually no curiosity about the world, and had always assumed that society functioned quite capably aside from any comments or speculations of mine. Initially my wife and I found each other's company quite stimulating. She seemed to have a voracious appetite for experience, and I suppose she was fascinated by my ennui. I'm sure that if I had been as fascinated by her curiosity, we might still be together. As it is, my dispassion prevailed and we exhausted all avenues of communication.

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My mother paid me a visit yesterday. Once again she castigated me for the barren atmosphere of my living quarters. She was also irritated by the necessity of sharing a teacup with me. As I live alone I have only the one teacup, and I consider the sharing of the teacup with guests an hospitable and intimate gesture. My mother seems to regard the paucity of china as evidence of stinginess or miserliness. She was always something of a *bonne vivante*, however. As I recall, she has many more teacups than she needs. Her extravagance was always a contentious issue with me.

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Unfortunately, after so many months of silence, I find conversation a disturbing intrusion on the integrity of my apartment. I'm always inclined to dissuade visitors from indulging in conversation. My apartment and I are very much in sympathy and I am always painfully aware that unfamiliar noises, such as the sound of a human voice, have a disorienting effect. My apartment has become accustomed to the shuffling sounds and the echo of the occasional breaking glass but any new and persistent noise upsets the monastic equilibrium that I've established over the years. Since my mother's visit both my apartment and I have been experiencing vague feelings of discontent. For one thing I have found myself engaging in introspection, an activity quite foreign to my nature. It seems that any contact with individuals or episodes from the past is liable to set various trains of thought in motion which I find unsettling and irritating.

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I noted this morning, with some alarm, that the street adjacent to the one in which my apartment building is located has been appropriated by the Department of Benches and that demolition has already begun.

I understand from a brief conversation with a passenger on the bus to work, that the government has approved the construction of the multi-unit bench project that has recently caused so much controversy. Apparently the proposed thirty-tier project will be completed some time within the new year.

There are fears in the neighbourhood that the complex will extend for several miles in each direction and I have been warned that our tenancy at the apartment building may be terminated soon, in order that the building can be demolished and more benches erected on the site.

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I remember now once having a hobby. When I was a child I used to bury dead animals in glass jars in the garden, and then disinter them from time to time, in order to observe the process of decomposition. This was considered a rather morbid pursuit for a young person, and I was persuaded to take up philately as a healthy alternative. I enjoyed collecting stamps immensely, but abandoned the practice at the earliest opportunity.

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My mother sent me a card today, thanking me for my hospitality and wishing me a speedy recovery from the indisposition that had so drastically altered my behaviour. I'm beginning to wonder if the lady who purports to be my mother is who she claims. I rarely recognise her, or can never be certain that I recognise her because she visits me or because she is my mother. It's a ticklish situation but I must confess that if I am to be visited by my mother, it's irrelevant who precisely materialises at the door, as long as they answer to the general description. I prefer to think that my visitor is an impostor despatched by a government agency which specialises in the wholesale supply of relatives to those of us who long ago lost contact with the original members of our families.

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Miss Klar has finally dismantled her desk and has been eyeing mine in recent days with an almost imperialistic longing. I have suggested that she requisition a new desk from the stores department, but she feels she might be required to answer some

embarrassing questions regarding the mysterious disappearance of her old one. I believe her anxiety is well-founded, and in case of a lightning purge within the organisation I have temporarily suspended my paperclip and stationery operation .

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When I was younger I began to gather around me a coterie of imaginary friends. There were women among them with whom I could make love, or converse intimately, or abandon – depending on my mood. There were subordinate workers within my organisation and superiors whom I would impress with my intelligence and sound judgement. I would also number among my friends some whose names were familiar to the general public by virtue of a remarkable accomplishment. I would introduce my imaginary women friends to these luminaries at the fashionable parties we would attend in my imagination. Occasionally they would run off together and the women would later return in great contrition to ask my forgiveness. In my imagination, at least, I rarely condoned their indiscretions.

I did this initially as a provision against those times in my life when companionship was not forthcoming. However I soon grew more attached to my imaginary acquaintances than to those from the real world and eventually I severed connection with all but the most unavoidable members of my social circle. After all, few could compare favourably with the assortment of illustrious companions with whom I passed my leisure time. The bonds and affections between my imaginary friends and myself were unbreakable, and dependent solely on my own moods and predispositions. They were available at all times to entertain me, or love me, or as an attentive audience to my thoughts and insights concerning themselves and the world at large. My new friends were always very appreciative of my advice or attention, whereas previously I had been treated with a certain levity or disdain.

Unfortunately, I grew finally bored with my imaginary friends. They seemed unable to exceed my expectations. I tried to introduce a greater variety of person into my mental society but each new individual bore such a strong resemblance to his or her predecessor, that I found their company too predictable to be enjoyable. I began to resent their constant toadying to my egomania and their hopeless lack of autonomy or originality. Even though, as time went by, their qualities and achievements became more impressive, it was obvious that my imaginary friends suffered from a profound atrophy of the spirit for which at the time I could find no explanation.

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I find I am now in a position to benefit from the Equable Tax Initiative recently introduced by the Government. This initiative provides for the repayment of welfare benefits by the working poor to those of higher incomes. The principle behind this excellent innovation is that by releasing the impecunious from the burden of indebtedness all citizens will enjoy a sense of moral equality – conducive, it has been asserted, to a harmonious economy and social order. I have always abhorred the high-handed paternalism of members of the tax-paying social groups in their dealings with the less prosperous members of our community and am greatly relieved that the cause of this long-standing inequity is at last to be addressed.

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Unfortunately, I've had to abandon my plan to buy a cat. Somehow my landlord was informed of my intentions, and this morning I found a note had been pushed under my door, informing me that cats were *personae non gratae* in the apartment building, and that unauthorised possession of a cat could invite unpleasant consequences. For

some reason I was under the impression that the landlord liked cats. However, since his communication this morning I recalled that both he and I share a mutual distaste for cats, and that I was confusing us with someone else who likes cats, or confusing cats with some other animal.

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I have been advised that my services at the office are no longer required. In fact my departure from work was expedited with what I can only describe as unseemly haste. No sooner had I walked through the door this morning, glanced up briefly and noted that Miss Klar was nowhere to be seen, than I found myself once more outside, on the street in fact, staring about me in some confusion.

I returned home and passed the morning contemplating the views from the windows of my apartment. Before me a panorama of benches stretched to the horizon, some already inhabited, others still in the process of construction. Perhaps Miss Klar is there, I thought, already occupied in dismantling her bench.

I wondered how I could have failed to notice before the intensification of activity around me. Cranes rise into the sky like a forest of steel. The screeching of drills resounds in the air, penetrating even the womb-like silence of my rooms. It seems as if some terrible invasion force is mobilising in the streets below.

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In the afternoon, the landlord appeared at my door. His expression was one of friendly concern and at first I suspected he had brought me glad tidings, perhaps news of my reinstatement at work. In fact he instructed me to vacate my apartment at the earliest opportunity. I explained that I could imagine no such opportunity arising for the

foreseeable future but he assured me that if no such opportunity arose spontaneously, he would provide one.

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The shuffling noises have ceased and I must confess a certain nostalgia for the distraction they afforded me from my thoughts. At present I seem to be unduly preoccupied with the disposition of my personal effects and other trivial details of this kind. Needless to say, with so much time on my hands, I am free to concentrate all my attention on whatever anxieties I might have concerning my future. I wish my mother was here. I wish my wife was here. I even wish the shuffling noises would begin again, only with redoubled vigour.

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I woke this morning to discover myself the beneficiary of an extraordinary stroke of good fortune. It seems that my mother has passed away unexpectedly and has provided for me in her will with a bench allocation. Judging by the rumours which have come to my attention, an unpleasant fate awaits those unfortunates convicted of vagrancy, and alternative accommodation – even on the benches – is hard to find.

This experience has taught me a valuable lesson. We are often tempted to regard fate as something malign and intractable, and yet on this occasion any despondency I might have suffered as a result of recent events, has been utterly redressed by the intervention of that mysterious force.

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Today, a number of workers arrived to remove my furniture and belongings. They were cheerful, whistling men, who performed their tasks with wonderful efficiency. I was informed that a simple solution had been devised to address the problem of my effects. As there would be no room on a bench for personal items, I need no longer concern myself about them.

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I am sitting on the floor of what was once my living room. Construction at the Bench Project seems to have stopped for the night and a pristine silence has fallen on the neighbourhood. How empty the apartment seems now. Even the atmosphere has undergone a subtle change. It is as if my apartment and I are no longer in sympathy. Perhaps it senses in some peculiar way its own impending demolition. The rooms are clammy and nervous and there is an air of accusation in the silence. It is as if my apartment believes that I might have endeavoured in some way to preserve each of the infinite number of moments we have shared over the years, the shuffling feet, the breaking glass, the closing of doors, the sporadic murmur of human voices, and made of them something permanent, a continuum in which our association would have endured forever.

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The benches are everywhere. Above me I can barely perceive any light, except for the dim yellow glare of the arc lamps on the upper tier. The giant screen television has been switched off for the night. The constant murmuring of indistinguishable voices hangs on the air like the beating of wings in a swarm of insects. Below me, and on all sides, I am surrounded by benches, almost all of which are occupied.

I am on the sixth tier, which is known almost jokingly as ‘the suffocation line.’ Apparently a high incidence of respiratory disease prevails among inhabitants of benches below the sixth tier. The air beneath me is damp and stagnant, due apparently to the condensation of breath on the benches at night and the inadequate ventilation. I have myself contracted a nasty cough during my brief sojourn in the Bench Project.

I have resumed employment with the company. They have issued me with a laptop computer and at eight o’clock each morning the postman brings me a file of documents to process, which he collects the following day and returns to head office. At the end of the week, providing my work is satisfactory, I receive a number of vouchers which are negotiable within the Project for food, items of clothing, and so forth. At twelve o’clock a young man delivers parcels of food and those of us who have accumulated a sufficient number of vouchers avail ourselves of this service. I am not disposed to sharing my food with less fortunate neighbours. In my new environment altruism is rarely appreciated and can even prove dangerous, particularly as many of the residents have gone without food for days. Soon after my arrival I experienced an attempt at coercion from the lady who occupied the seat to the left of me. On several occasions I was obliged to physically restrain her attempts to deprive me of my vouchers. The lady in question, however, threw herself from the bench one evening and disappeared into the crowd below. As she never returned to her place, which was in fact occupied the following morning by an elderly gentleman, I can only presume her attempt at suicide met with success.

Meanwhile, I am managing to maintain cordial relations within my immediate neighbourhood. The family who occupy the seats to my right, are very pleasant people in fact, although the father is inclined to a rather wearisome bonhomie, which during my occasional moods of dejection I find a little exasperating. However, they are considerably more equable companions than the lady who lived at one time in the seat to the left.