

Landlord in the Attic

by Tanya Vavilova

Our ramshackle terrace in Redfern, shared by seven, is falling apart, quite literally. The kitchen ceiling collapsed last week, squashing the chairs and table flat. Adam took photos of the damage and called it A Work of Art. Whorls of black mould decorate the walls, and everything leaks and stinks like damp laundry hung up inside too long. The wind is battering the windows and walls. It's been raining non-stop for forty-two days.

Ellie, we need two more buckets, Lakshi tells me.

There aren't any, I say, sipping my tea at the kitchen counter.

What?

THERE ARE NO MORE BUCKETS.

Oh for fuck's sake.

Here, use *this*. I hand Lakshi an old, charred saucepan.

Ellie! Why don't you make yourself useful!

You know I'm not good in emergencies, I say.

It's true. I panic whenever called upon to apply first aid or dial triple zero. I'm also a perfectionist so I avoid doing anything I suspect I might not get right.

Well, make me a cup of tea then, Lakshi snaps.

Sure.

I will the kettle to boil with my eyes. Nothing happens. People are always demanding too much.

Where's my tea, El?

I'm moving out of this shithole, I say to no-one in particular.



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We're always threatening to leave, every time something breaks.

Jim Beam strides into the kitchen, his hair a wet tangle, looking real mad. I can only assume he hasn't managed to patch the roof up outside.

I'm moving out, he says.

Oh yeah? Where would you go?

John's living under the bridge, I could join him, he says, It's gotta be drier than this rat hole. They got this bonfire and they roast those purple potatoes, you know the ones. And they drink water straight out of the harbour.

He means the Harbour Bridge. The Minister has decked out the underside with portaloos and blue tarpaulins. And if you donate bone marrow every month, no-one bothers you much.

Jim, you'd get sick of potatoes, I say.

Nikki agrees with me, walking in to the kitchen. She's wrapped in a blue bath towel, the bobby pins in her hair jutting out like spikes.

New hole, she says, pointing upward.

This is what I mean, that hole's the size of a tomato, Jim says, indignant.

We all come and stand beside him.

I wring water out of my dress into the nearest bucket, faded red, cracked, older than my mother.

Ellie, where the fuck's the tea at?

It's coming. I drag myself over to the sideboard and press the kettle button. I don't really have telekinetic powers, though I like to make out like I do. I measure out two heaped teaspoons of *Cheer Up, Sunshine* and pour boiling water into the teapot.

Ellie, could you pass a cup? Nikki asks.

The one with the kangaroo okay?

I want the scrabble mug.



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H for Harry or G for Godiva?

Cheer Up, Sunshine was a gift from Flo, my ex-girlfriend. It's green tea with a smattering of guarana berries, or something like that. What have you got to be sad about? Flo used to say. Well, there's my depression, I'd remind her. Oh *that*, she'd say.

One day, when Flo was at work, I chucked her stuff out the third-floor window and watched the neighbours fossick for knickknacks, shoes and leather. A teenage girl with an undercut made off with Flo's vintage pair of Jeffrey Campbells. I laughed behind the curtains.

While I sip my tea and reminisce, the others plug up the holes in the walls with old rags. A bit here, a bit there. I shout: *Plug it up! Plug it up! Plug it up!* I'm thinking of poor bleeding Carrie, of course. Nikki tells me to shut it.

This next rag's going in your mouth, babe, she says.

She doesn't get my humour.

Afterwards we crawl into Clara's bed and put on our respirators. The green air-purifiers, cheaply made, leave imprints on our pale, papery skin. We look like giant, carnivorous insects. Better that than inhaling toxic fumes, though.

I spot some strange rust-coloured spots fanning out from one corner of the doona. Honey II wriggles in and pokes her little nose out, resting her face on my shoulder.

A few weeks ago, the eaves outside my third-floor bedroom window were torn off by the wind, landing on the footpath below, rusty nails pointing skyward. I ran out in my bathrobe, my boobs poking out, and saw a mangled paw peeking out from beneath the timber.

My rotting eaves had squashed Honey I.



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The whole street turned out for the funeral, including the nasty Wilson children who used to throw pebbles at Honey. Lakshi said a few words, so did Adam, and I served pickled onions and frankfurts. When Mr Wilson complained about my catering, I socked him and told him to Respect The Dead. Someone called the police and that was the end of poor Honey's wake.

Honey II licks me and, for a moment, she looks just like the first Honey. But, what do I know. My eyes are streaming from the dust and mould and whatever other toxins thrive here. I might even be allergic to the cat.

Shove over, will ya. Jim Beam is always complaining about falling off the mattress.

You shove over.

Tuck your knees in, I say, helpfully.

Nikki's underarms smell like damp forest, and I nudge her in the ribs. Shove over, I hiss. We shower ever second day, except Nikki who has a water phobia. At the moment, with the help of Clara (a trained-now-unemployed psychologist) she can comfortably look at a teaspoon of water.

Nikki, please, I say, have a bath tomorrow, ok?

Piss off, Ellie.

We have a version of this conversation every night.

In the morning, Louie the landlord pays us a visit. Since the rains started, Louie has become a grey-haired fixture in our home, pottering around, painting this, painting that. The superficial 'improvements' seem bizarre given the prospect of another collapsed ceiling and so we start to suspect he plans on selling the place. We know lots of other desperate students, immigrants and creative-types who would love to get their hot little hands on a shithole like this.

Louie likes to do all the repairs himself; it's his special brand of cost reduction. He mixes my name up and raises my blood pressure. Clara says this is no good for me – he makes



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me violent. Usually, we do some breathing exercises and knock down trees with baseball bats. This helps, a little.

Been living here long, love? Louie asks, when I open the door.

Oh 'bout six years, I say, rolling my eyes.

Hannah, isn't it?

I'm Ell-ie.

No need to be cranky, love.

If he calls me love one more time, I might just snap his rubber-chicken-neck. But I don't want to upset Clara. While he disappears upstairs, I make another batch of *Cheer Up, Sunshine*. Honey II jumps on my lap and we talk about our Plans For The Future. I tell Honey to get out while she still can.

Follow your heart, I say.

She snickers.

Out of the two us, the cat has more sense.

Hannah? Louie calls, coming down the stairs.

It's Ell-ie.

Come look at the windowsills. They look real nice.

I follow his watermelon bum up the narrow stairs. I wonder how many regular-sized bottoms might be made from his rump. At least six or seven. Maybe eight. He tells me how lucky I am to have a landlord like him.

If you had a different landlord, you wouldn't be so lucky, he says.

You're a regular Mother Teresa, I tell him.

Our front door is rotting and splintering, mushrooms grow in the corridor, and when we shower we take a saltshaker with us to ward off the leeches. I don't need to be told how lucky I am.



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I wonder why he's painted the windowsills. The windows rattle and the glass has come clean off the pane – dash of paint won't do anything. And what was wrong with natural wood, anyway?

He spreads his arms out.

Ta-da!

The glass is smeared with fresh white paint and my bedroom floor is covered in little flakes of what, optimistically, could be said to look like snow.

When Louie is out of earshot, I curse him to hell.

The fucker has painted my windows shut.

In spring, we fumigate. We are on first-name basis with our pest control guy, the sweet-natured Jordan. We call him for rats, roaches, bird mites, ants, termites, spiders and those new generation insects that are a cross between turtles and black widow spiders.

He brings me red roses and those sticky caramels in heart-shaped boxes. When I protest, he tells me I don't need to reciprocate his love.

Let me love you, he says.

(Seeing as how others aren't falling over themselves to love me, sure, okay).

But just for now, until I find someone else, I tell him.

Jordan agrees.

Flowers are hard to come by these days. I know they're expensive. I mean, look, you could be saving for a little studio in some concrete bunker in Wolli Creek, I tell him. You'd have enough money for a deposit in ... twenty, maybe twenty-five years.

The roses stop arriving on my doorstep after that.

In summer, our cramped terrace heats up like a pizza pocket. There's no cross-breeze, no air-con, and when we pass each other in the corridor, our torsos stick together.



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The heat is driving us batty. It's all we can talk about.

I've never been so cranky or violent, I hate everyone and everything, my mum is coming to visit so we have to tidy this dump – she makes me so, so nervous, Nikki still hasn't washed, and Jim Beam has drunk all the fucking bourbon, and there's no ice, anyway.

When Louie comes to the door on Monday to demand the rent, I'm already pretty wound up and I hit him over the head with a saucepan.

There's a hollow *klang* and he slumps forward onto the lino.

Fuck, Ellie!

Nikki is screaming.

What are you doing?

Is he dead?

I roll him over. Nope. Come on, let's tie him up.

And put him *where*? Nikki asks, turning a lovely radish-pink.

What about my room? I say, he might like the freshly painted windowsills.

I'm trying to take more initiative – and I think it's paying off. No-one questions my behaviour, not even Clara. This does worry me a little.

We hide Louie in the draughty attic above my room, and slip pieces of toast between the wooden slats.

We don't pay rent anymore and everyone agrees this arrangement is a big improvement. The only person who objects on moral grounds is Jim Beam – and so he moves under the Harbour Bridge. A week in, he dies of dengue.

At first I feel bad about keeping Louie locked up but now that we've settled into a routine of sorts, even Louie seems to be enjoying himself. He's even started on renovations, put in some plumbing, strung some fairy lights between the rafters.

Sometimes we visit him. We squeeze ourselves in between broken springs on the miniature couch and sprawl on his dusty floor.



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You know, it isn't so bad here, Louie says, examining the new carpet we give him. It's one of those old faded Turkish rugs that some of our grandparents had but covered in mildew. We tell Louie we can't spare anything else.

You're lucky to have a carpet at all, we tell him. And we believe it. He is lucky to have people like us.

I'm not complaining. I like it here, fewer responsibilities. Plus my night vision's improved, Louie tells us.

For his fiftieth birthday, we take the smoke detector off the wall, and light up a Betty Crocker like a warzone. We even get him a cat, Honey III.

I take Flo back and together we look after Louie in the attic. Because we no longer have to pay rent, Flo and I get to eat out once in a while and even buy warm clothes and proper rain gear. Flo buys a new pair of ridiculously high Jeffrey Campbells. We book flights to Tasmania. Most of the population there live underground, in a network of burrows, surviving on mushrooms and grubs.

It's poverty tourism, I complain to Flo.

Babe, it's all we can afford. You want to go on a holiday or not?

This is so fucked.

Flo and I decide to get married on our return. Louie has started seeing another rehabilitated landlord, a Mr Hockie, and in the spirit of generosity we invite him and Louie to the wedding, along with Clara and Nikki and Lakshi and Adam and Harry and Godiva. We make an effigy of Jim Beam and prop him up against the bar – he would've loved that. We wear tuxedos and drink bourbon, and make merry until curfew.

It rains every day now. Flo's eggs have shape-shifted into sperm, thanks to New Developments in Science. We have children, first one then two and three, and so continue



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the sordid cycle of life. Louie is our kids' godfather, and we let him out of the attic for each birth. He seems to appreciate it, and we appreciate him.



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