

Moving Day

by Allan Weiss

In 1968 my family moved to Ville St. Laurent. After years of promises and declarations, my father finally bought a house, and we were to move in on May 1. That was Moving Day in Montreal, where one day has always been set aside for leases to end. That may have been one of the many rules about renting that my Dad wanted to escape--along with not making too much noise, and not running a business at home that might get the landlord in trouble and our family evicted.

Dad announced his decision at dinner one day in early January. My sister and I had just returned to school after the Christmas break, and we were finally getting back into our routines, and were together again with our friends.

"It's official," he said. "We're going to find a house of our own at last."

My sister looked horrified. "I don't want to move!" she said. "I like it here. All my friends are here."

"You'll make new ones."

"It'll be better for us in the long run," my mother said,

stirring her goulash with her fork to cool it off.

Their answers were like lines out of a TV show, and I half-seriously wondered if my parents had rehearsed this whole scene beforehand. I was really torn about it. Naturally, I didn't want to leave my friends, my school, and my neighbourhood, either. Howard Cohen was my best friend that year, and we were the leaders of a small "alliance" that vowed we would protect each other if Steve Thornton, the school bully, attacked any of us. I knew the teachers at Bedford School--which ones were "strict," which ones nice, if not from experience then from what others said. I didn't want to give up the kids, the streets, the back yards, and the stores I knew.

But a house meant my own room at last, as my father had long promised. It meant I could have friends come over to play football in my back yard without Mrs. Selinsky, the landlady, shooing them away if they tore up the grass too much. And a house meant something different and exciting, a space beyond what was old and boring. I figured I could get used to it, after all.

"I don't want to move," my sister repeated, then crossed her arms and fell silent, eyes lowered to her plate. My father went on about how he'd finally have a place of his own to set up his bookkeeping business, how we'd be in a quiet neighbourhood (I didn't know what he was talking about; Goyer wasn't noisy), how

we'd never throw money away on rent again.

"Do we have to change schools in the middle of the year?" I asked. "Couldn't we keep going to Bedford till the end?"

"No. How would you do that?"

My sister was just finishing Grade Seven, and would be in high school next year anyway; that would mean two new schools in one year. It made no sense for either of us to change schools with only a month and a half to go.

"It'll be all right," my mother said, again as if she were following a TV script. But I knew better.

*

So much happened in the world that spring that our move sometimes faded completely from my mind. My father watched "Pulse News" on CFCE every night before supper, and it became impossible to escape the scary, violent stories that Andrew Marquis reported. I was fully aware that the United States and the Soviet Union could start World War III any time, over anything, but that was a hazy fear, a what-if that meant little more than the basis for some of the science-fiction movies my father and I watched on Saturday afternoons. What we saw on the news, though, couldn't be pushed away: American reporters were reporting from Vietnam, with film of wounded, wide-eyed soldiers being carried on stretchers, especially after the Tet Offensive.

Usually my father made some kind of comment when he watched the news, but now he would sit wordlessly, with his hands folded between his knees, a sick and angry look on his face as if what was going on was a personal attack. He hated the Russians for what they'd done to Hungary and the other countries in Eastern Europe. He saw them doing the same thing to people so far away they might as well have been on another planet--but we could watch, now, and see jumpy but clear pictures of the jungles and helicopters, and men looking over their shoulders at the camera.

"Turn that off," my mother said one time, though her eyes were riveted on the screen. "We've seen enough."

"Shh," my father said, gently.

"I wish we had a colour TV," I said, for what must have been the hundredth time. I both wanted, and didn't want, to stop watching, too.

"We can't afford one," my father answered. "Yet."

After the international news, my father pushed himself out of the living-room armchair with a grunt. He was starting to gain weight then. He would drive all over Montreal delivering or picking up ledgers for his bookkeeping business, and often have lunch at delis near his clients' businesses, on St. Lawrence and Ste. Catherine. At first, he brought home grease-stained paper bags with leftovers, then decided it wasn't worth the bother.

"Goddamn Commies," he said. "Everywhere they go there's nothing but trouble."

I agreed, and I dreamed of someday doing something spectacular to the world's Communists--slaughtering them by the thousands. There had to be a way to get rid of them, without slaughtering everybody else at the same time, and one day we'd figure out how. They were bullies, violent people with minds we could never fathom.

*

In March, my father told us he'd found a house in Ville St. Laurent, where prices were lower and a good number of Jewish people lived. He had us all meet in the living room, where we sat on the plastic-covered chesterfield and gazed at the photo from the real-estate agent. The house looked tiny and squat compared to our duplex. How would we all fit in it?

"It's a good bungalow, not too old, and it's got a big basement I can use for the office. And a nice back yard." He looked at me. "You'll like that."

Sheila had only glanced at the photo; now she refused to look up from her shoes.

"And like I said," my father continued, his voice cheery as he tried to pretend we were thrilled with the show he was putting on, "you'll finally have your own rooms like you're supposed to."

"You're too old to share now," my mother put in.

I knew she was right. But this was starting to get serious; I began to believe it would really happen.

"So?" Sheila said, without much energy. She wanted her own room as much as I did.

As moving day came nearer, the house—as we called our duplex flat, even if it wasn't a house--began to look and even sound stranger. The rooms were usually crowded with stuff: toys and school supplies in the room Sheila and I shared; files, ledgers, and the bulky electric adding machine in my father's office; papers and books everywhere else. My father's paint-by-numbers pictures hung over the chesterfield and my parents' bed. But now dishes, books, and magazines began disappearing into cardboard boxes that my mother brought home from Steinberg's. Opening or closing a light meant leaning over stacks of cartons printed with the logos of cereals and brands of spaghetti we never bought. Rooms developed bizarre new echoes.

At school I told my friends I was moving soon, that we were buying a house and wouldn't have to throw our money away to a landlord any more. Howard gave me a sharp look. I thought it was because he and his family were too poor to buy a house, and I felt bad for him. My mother had told me recently that Howard's father had a bad back and couldn't work; his mother did

dressmaking to bring in some money, but not a lot.

"You're really going?" Howard asked.

"Yeah." I didn't know what else to say. Kenny Wasserman, a kid I was sometimes friends, sometimes enemies with, was part of our alliance now and looked on wonderingly. I saw him absently scratching his cheek. Jeffrey Gold, one of the quietest kids I ever knew, was too busy counting his hockey cards to pay much attention. I'd be leaving them all, without any say in the matter. It wasn't fair.

So I confronted my father at supper. "Do I have to change Hebrew Schools, too?"

"Eh?" It was clear he hadn't thought about it. From his frustrated expression it was clear I'd won. "Fine! You'll go to the old Hebrew School." We made our plans: he'd drive me to and from Beth Hamedrash shul on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

*

A few weeks before we moved, we were all sitting in the living room watching *Daniel Boone* when the show stopped suddenly and a sign came up: "Special News Bulletin." "We interrupt this program for a special news bulletin," the announcer said, as if he needed to tell us, and I sat there frightened and thrilled. It was something horrible, something exciting, and the first thought that went through my mind was those tests of the emergency

broadcasting system, with the loud *beeeep*. Was there an attack? "From NBC News, here is David Brinkley reporting." My father leaned forward, and I could tell he was scared, too. My mother watched with her brows knit, eyes wide.

Then came the story. "Dr. Martin Luther King has been shot." I barely knew who he was--he was the leader of the American Negroes, or some of them. I couldn't tell if he was one of the leaders who caused the riots. The news was full of riots and Vietnam protests; the Americans seemed to be going crazy. I waited for a reaction from my parents, but they didn't seem to know what to think, either. The news wasn't as bad as we'd feared, but it wasn't good. Brinkley told us about how King had been brought to a hospital, how the police were looking for a suspect. There were scenes of Negro women crying.

"Who's he?" my sister asked. I was thankful it was Sheila who asked first. I didn't want to look dumb.

"A good man," my father said. "One of the good ones."

But there were scenes of marches he'd led. He'd caused trouble, stirred things up. It wasn't a good idea to do that, because you never knew how others might react. It was better to stay quiet.

For a while, the Vietnam War wasn't the first story each night; everything seemed to centre on Martin Luther King's death,

and the huge funeral in Atlanta. "This is a very moving day for America," one of the announcers said, and it reminded me that I had my own things to worry about.

*

I saw our new house only once before we moved in, just before May 1. My parents were having it painted, so the place smelled of fresh paint. All I could see were big, empty rooms, including a living room with bare wood floors that creaked, and a kitchen missing its fridge and stove. With no curtains on the windows, the house glared with sunlight casting odd, pale shadows. I felt as if we were being watched by all the houses around us. Between what was going to be my bedroom and Sheila's was the door to the basement; I opened it carefully to keep from smearing the paint, walked partway down the stairs, and saw a vast expanse of checkered linoleum.

I kept expecting my sister to say that she hated it, but she took my mother's guided tour silently. I was glad of that--I couldn't have tolerated her whining today.

"Look at the back yard," my mother said to us. She opened the rear door at the far end of the kitchen, holding it so we could see through to the square of lawn beyond. At our duplex we had access not only to our own back yard (at least, when Mrs. Selinsky wasn't complaining), but the ones on either side as

well. Here, the lawn was fully enclosed by bushes on the sides and a solid wooden fence at the back. A large tree stood in the far corner. "It's all ours," my mother said. "No landlady."

I was about to say that it was smaller than our old one, but refrained. She probably knew it.

*

May 1 was a school day, but my parents didn't make us attend either school. We watched the movers--a couple of huge French guys smelling of cigarette smoke--haul boxes out to the Allied Van Lines truck. My father drove my sister and me to our grandmother's apartment so we wouldn't get in the way; Bubby let us watch TV all day, except for when she served us scrambled eggs and Niblets.

At 4:30 Dad came to pick us up. He looked tired and not terribly happy, and I wondered if he was regretting the move as much as we were. He drove us straight to the new house, although I wished he'd taken us to the old one so I could check one last time for anything I might have forgotten. I'd gone through my room a dozen times, finding the odd Lego brick or soldier in corners or under the radiator, but I was convinced that things I'd lost over the years were just waiting for me if only I looked long enough.

The house looked different with all its boxes, and with the

new carpet covering the living room floor. We still had no curtains, so my mother had put up old sheets in the meantime. The house still smelled of paint, as well as the chemical odour of the new, gold-streaked linoleum in the hall. My own room was crowded with boxes; the dresser I'd had to share with my sister (she was getting a new one of her own) and my bed stood crookedly in its centre. I started shifting things around to make space for myself. At least now I wouldn't have to answer to my sister for my every move, for where every object might end up.

"Oy, what a mess," my mother said as she examined the rooms. "Start fixing it all up. Put your stuff away." From the things she said I gathered she and my father had spent the move ordering the men about, arguing with them about how many boxes there ought to be. "One of them is missing, I know it," she said.

"What's in it?" my father asked. He wanted to go down into the basement and set up his office.

"Towels and plates. They must have lost them." She looked through some of the now-unsealed boxes. "Sugar," she muttered.

At that moment, a low rumble outside grew into a roar. I turned in time to see an airplane, flying shockingly low, zip across the little window in our front door. We were right on the flight routes into Dorval Airport.

I managed to get most of my clothes and toys unpacked that

evening--just enough to make my room look familiar. After supper, we watched TV in our new living room; I lay on the springy, but suffocating, carpet and kept getting distracted by the lights of the cars against the "curtains." I'd never lived at street level before. Meanwhile, passing airplanes drowned out the shows at critical points.

I knew that I'd never get used to this--and I shouldn't have to. Moving hadn't been *my* idea.

I couldn't sleep that night, or at least not until past midnight. I could tell the time because I heard the end of the late "Pulse News" playing low but audibly in the living room. The reports were focusing on Vietnam again; the riots that followed King's shooting were over, although other ones, for different reasons--mostly the war--kept breaking out. France seemed to be having a revolution. The Czechoslovakians were trying to be less Communist. I heard my father close the TV set, then pass my room on the way to his and my mother's, whispering something to himself.

I couldn't stop thinking about what would happen at my new school the next day, how I'd cope with a new teacher and a classroom full of strangers. My mother repeated over and over that I'd make new friends, as if you just went up to some kid you'd never seen before and suddenly became friends. At least

Hebrew School followed immediately afterwards; once regular school let out, I could head to the shul on Mackenzie and see my real friends. I fell asleep while a plane passed by.

*

The next morning my mother walked me down to the new school. I didn't want her to take me any further than the steel-mesh fence, but she came inside. Gardenview looked all right--I'd been picturing a school out of a nineteenth-century British novel, with high walls and narrow windows. My mother brought me to the office, where a secretary in a curly hairdo took over to lead me to my class. By the time I turned around to wave goodbye to my mother she was on her way out the door. I knew she had a busy day ahead fixing up the new house, but she could have stayed long enough to say more than, "Okay" to everything the secretary said. I half-wanted to see the new class, half-dreaded it. How different would St. Laurent be? What were the rules? I was wearing the new sweater my mother had bought me for the occasion; where was I supposed to hang it?

Room 6 was down a side corridor, and was identified by a triangular piece of black metal above the open door, with the "6" in white. That was the opposite of Bedford School, which had black on white, but otherwise, from a first glance, it seemed the classroom was pretty much the same as Bedford's. All the kids

looked at me as the secretary led me inside.

"Miss Acker," she said to the teacher. "Here is your new student, Lawrence Teitel."

Miss Acker was a tall woman with thick glasses and a stiff smile. I recognized that smile from some of my hockey cards--all curved lips, no teeth showing, no shine in the eyes. "Welcome, Lawrence."

"Hi."

"There's a seat back there for you." I hunted past the strangers' faces and found the seat. The desks and chairs in the room were the same blond, glossy wood I was familiar with; the desks even had the strange round inkwell hole that no longer served their original purpose. The Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal calendar, with its blue numbers for school days and red ones for holidays, hung on the cupboard door. Even the round electric clock looked the same. As I sat down, scraping the chair loudly, I heard snickers behind me. Two girls giggled to each other beside me.

"We're doing arithmetic, Lawrence," Miss Acker said. I wished she would stop talking to me. "Did you do fractions at your old school?"

"Yeah."

"Common denominators?"

"Yeah." My mouth started to go dry.

"Good. We'll see how you do." I was afraid she was going to ask me to get up in front of the class and show off what I knew, but she turned her attention to the blackboard instead.

"Your *old* school," somebody whispered. For some reason, he thought it was funny. Then I realized I was still wearing my sweater, and didn't know what to do with it.

I stayed out of sight most of the morning. I was amazed at the kids' behaviour; Miss Acker didn't know how to control a class, or they were just uncontrollable. At recess we filed out to the schoolyard, and one of the kids took the trouble to say, "Nice sweater" in a richly sarcastic voice. I didn't know who he was or why he felt it necessary to say that, but I vowed never to wear it again.

I went home for lunch. I'd gotten used to the paint smell overnight, but noticed it again as soon as I entered. I ate my peanut butter sandwich silently, watching my mother rush in and out of the kitchen. She was still struggling to organize things, especially with the new fridge and stove standing in awkward positions, and unpacked boxes getting in her way in the hallway and living room.

"So how's your new school?" she asked when she finally felt she could sit down opposite me.

I shrugged. There was nothing to say. Or at least there was nothing I could tell her. Luckily, my sister came in then, and so I didn't have to come up with any more answers.

After school my father drove me to the shul, and there I got back with Howard, Jeffrey, Wayne, Kenny. I told them about my new school, about Miss Acker. "I don't like the kids," I said, out of loyalty to them and because it was the truth.

"Are they Jewish?" Wayne asked, as if that mattered.

"Yeah, I think so." But they were still alien; St. Laurent was like another planet. We traded a few cards, although hockey season was over and all we had were "Monkees" cards that Kenny refused to collect.

*

For the next couple of days, I tried to stay out of Miss Acker's line of sight. Sometimes she would ask painfully easy questions, and I'd put up my hand, hoping I could speed things along. It was like in oral reading, when the teacher would call on the worst readers, as if trying to waste all our time. Generally, though, I struggled to keep my hands folded on my desk as I'd been taught at Bedford, although no one else seemed to be doing it.

As bad as Miss Acker was, the kids were simply impossible to understand. I noticed they called each other, and me, by last

names rather than first names; they used words like "fuck" and "shit" which the kids at Bedford never used, even after school. I didn't know why the kids here were so different. I kept looking for an answer, sure I could find it if I listened, just kept my mouth shut, and paid attention.

But then I made a mistake. We were doing science, and Miss Acker asked if anybody could answer her question about how many planets there were. I knew about the solar system because my father had taught me, and he'd let me read his science fiction magazines. I found myself talking about the planets longer than I planned to, mostly because she kept asking me more questions. "Which is the biggest? Which is the furthest from the sun?" I wanted her to ask the others, but she kept coming back to me. Finally, she asked me about whether there were really canals on Mars. I knew that there weren't, but I said, "I don't know," and looked down at my desk till she left me alone.

At recess the kids started in on me. "Hey, Spaceman!" "What's your spaceship like?" I tried smiling, but they just kept going. It wasn't a joke any more.

One of them came right up to me against the fence. "I asked you a question. What does Mars look like?" When I didn't answer he said, "Eh? Spaceman?" He was tall, thin, with a mouthful of braces.

"Leave me alone."

"Leave me alone."

It made no sense. I'd done nothing to them. I didn't want to be there in the first place. I tried to walk away from them but three or four stood in my way; others were playing Champ in the squares beyond, and I wanted to watch one of the games.

"Hey, Spaceman?"

When they finally got tired of waiting for an answer the kids moved away. But I knew I was marked.

After school I walked home keeping my head bowed, watching the sidewalk slide by beneath my feet. I'd known practically every crack on the sidewalks of Goyer. Here I'd have to watch every step, make sure I didn't trip over anything. But the trees were budding, and I couldn't resist looking up at them sometimes, as if they had something to offer.

*

The "Spaceman" business continued, day after day. It naturally led to fights. "Shut up" didn't work, and neither did turning my back. Pushing led to punches. At Bedford you could identify the bullies and stay out of their way, unless they tried to take your hockey card money or they simply felt like beating someone up. But these weren't guys you could single out; they were just the regular kids. I'd once told my mother about Steve

Thornton, and she'd said, "Just ignore him and he'll stop." But I knew better, I understood life in schoolyards more than she did: bullies didn't stop till you fought back.

One recess the tall kid with braces started up again. We ended up wrestling on the pavement, sometimes getting punches in but mostly just grabbing. A teacher came running out of the school and hauled us off the ground, then sent us inside. That was when I got sent to the principal's office for the first time in my life. The kid and I sat for twenty minutes in the school office, just outside the door with the black sign saying, "Mr. R. G. Carrington Principal." We waited for something to happen, ignoring each other as we watched the secretary scribble things on a large sheet of lined paper.

Mr. Carrington's door opened at last. He was a huge man with a thin moustache. "Come in here, you two." I thought this was my chance at last; I'd tell him what was happening to me, and he'd put a stop to it. That was his job.

Mr. Carrington sat behind his desk, which was mounded with papers; a picture of Queen Elizabeth II hung above his head. There were hard wooden chairs facing him, but he didn't tell us to sit down.

"I don't want any more fighting, all right?"

"But he started it--!" I began.

"I don't care who started it! That's not my concern." He leaned forward in his chair, making its leather squeak. "No more, is that understood? Now go back to your classes."

"But--!"

"Dismissed."

So that was it. I was shocked but not really surprised.

The one thing I knew I couldn't do was tell my parents, Miss Acker, or anyone else. That would be the end of me. I had to fight my own battles--that was obvious, not just from what my father had always said but also from what I knew. You couldn't be a cry-baby. Visions of my mother marching into the school to defend me sent chills through me.

"So how was school?" she asked me every day.

"Fine."

At last, she asked me, "Aren't you making any friends?"

"No."

"Why? How are the kids? They're all right?"

"No." But I didn't elaborate. I couldn't tell her how much I hated them. I couldn't tell her they were mean for no reason I could come up with, and I didn't think she'd believe me anyway.

"Why, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She waited for me to say more. "They're making trouble?"

"Never mind."

She dropped the subject at last.

During classes I was bored; at recess and lunch hour, before we returned to the safety of Room 6, I was terrified. I had no idea when someone would decide to launch into the teasing, or pick a fight. It was ridiculous, it was so crazy.

Sheila, meanwhile, wasn't doing much better. I saw her every now and then among the Grade 7s, always alone. At school--even back at Bedford--we always pretended that we didn't know each other, and I refused to walk home with her if my parents asked me to or if I ran into Sheila in the schoolyard after the final bell. Now, I wasn't sure which of us would suffer more if it became known, or at least too obvious, that we were related.

Not all the kids seemed anxious to pick fights, of course. I was put together with Danny Elbaum and Paul Schneider on a group project making a miniature tropical village for Geography. It was supposed to be from some island full of jungles and collections of grass huts. We got along all right, but they had their own friends. At Hebrew School I made sure my real friends knew what I was dealing with. The worst words they came up with were "jerk" and "stinker," and I was amazed at how different the two districts were. It was hard to believe I was still in Montreal.

For the next few weeks I managed to avoid having Miss Acker

notice me. I hated her for what she'd done to me, just as much as I hated the kids who continued to pick on me. She should have known better, but I'd long noticed that grownups knew nothing about our world. I had to keep her out of my life, to keep myself safe. If I kept my head down, in more ways than one, I'd be all right.

One day at lunch my mother insisted on asking me about the kids again. "Are you still having trouble with them?"

"No." That was almost true. I was having fewer fights, though I was still known as "Spaceman."

"Are you sure?"

"They're just not. . . ." I couldn't think of a word that fit. "Nice" was ridiculous; I wanted to say "civilized."

"They're spoiled," Ma said.

That made sense. The new neighbourhood was richer than our old one; everybody lived in houses, not duplexes, and despite how much I hated St. Laurent I couldn't help seeing that the area was nicer than Goyer. More trees lined the street, and some were already blossoming. Flowers were planted in bunches across the house fronts, not just in tight little rock gardens near the stairs. Our own house was finally starting to lose its paint smell. If only the kids--

"Spoiled rotten."

I looked up at her, and saw something in her eyes. Maybe I was imagining it, but I got the sense she'd run into the same thing, that she'd tried to make friends with the neighbours and gotten nowhere. I realized that I never saw any of our neighbours come to the house, the way her friends on Goyer had done. She'd often have tea with Mrs. Cohen or Mrs. Wasserman--even when I was enemies with their sons that week.

"They're not *haymische*," she said. I didn't know what the word meant, but I felt as if I didn't have to. "They're not the same kind of people."

*

I counted the days till the end of school. Then, in early June, we were watching TV when that notice flashed again on the screen: "Special News Bulletin," it said, and again my heart jumped. My mother said, "Oy, what now?"

"We interrupt this program for a special news bulletin. . .
. "

I stared at the screen as a reporter came on, and announced that Robert Kennedy had been shot. I didn't know very much about who he was, but I knew he was John Kennedy's brother, and I remembered being very small and learning that the President had been shot. "Our" President, I'd thought. I knew Robert Kennedy wasn't "our" anything, but that didn't matter.

"My God," my father said. "My God."

"That family," my mother said. "No *mazel*."

Robert Kennedy wasn't dead, and half my mind said that he wouldn't die; it would be too much. The other half didn't know. The TV showed tape of Robert Kennedy walking through a crowd, then the camera shook, and all you could see was him lying on the floor, his head supported by someone.

"Why'd they shoot him?" my sister asked, and I knew it was a stupid question. I think even she realized that. Nobody answered, because there was no answer. It made no sense. As the reporters came on, telling their stories, I watched silently, and so did the rest of my family. There was nothing to say.

Allan Weiss is Associate Professor of English and Humanities at York University. He has published articles on Canadian literature, the short story, and science fiction; recent publications include "The Form and Function of the Modern Fable in the Short Stories of Janet Frame" in *Commonwealth Essays & Studies* 33.2 (2011), "Between Collection and Cycle: The Mini-Cycle" in *Short Story* 17.2 (2009), and "Offred's Complicity and the Dystopian Tradition in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*"

in *Studies in Canadian Literature* 34.1 (2009).

He has also published about two dozen short stories, including the story cycle *Living Room* (Boheme Press, 2001), and, most recently, "Black Book" in *Bridges: A Global Anthology of Short Stories* Ed. Maurice Lee (Temenos, 2012) and "The Whole Megillah" in *On Spec* (Summer 2011).