

The Balcony
A short story
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I love my balcony.

I know it sounds odd. I suppose it could have something to do with my childhood. My parents had a huge back yard, and as a child I would sit on the back steps of the house and watch...life. Squirrels running around collecting nuts for the winter. Birds at the feeder. Bees bumbling about during the summer, collecting pollen for the hive. It made me feel as if I was watching a larger world; more than just myself and my parents.

Mom and Dad divorced when I was ten years old. I remember a lot of yelling and screaming in the months leading up to it. I don't even know why they separated, but we had to leave that house and I lived with my Mom in her new apartment. It had a small balcony, overlooking the parking lot. I didn't spend much time out there because of the exhaust fumes and noisy traffic.

My Mom never remarried, though she had a string of live-in boyfriends who made sure I knew I was unwanted -- an annoyance. I didn't handle it well. I would yell and carry on and stamp my feet. One of my "uncles" took that as an excuse to backhand me across the face. I didn't do it again.

When I was seventeen I graduated high school. I got a job as a telemarketer -- excuse me: "sales development representative" -- and moved out of that apartment as soon as I could afford it.

Unfortunately, the job didn't pay well enough for me to even rent a house with a back yard, so I had to settle for another apartment. I found a building that had been built in the 70's: brown and beige, like most of the buildings from that time, but what attracted me to it was its design: a "U" shape with the balconies directed inward, viewing a grassy courtyard with some trees. Children were playing in the makeshift glade, and there were squirrels and birds, and from the fifth floor the view took me back to my childhood, watching nature do its thing.

I was home.

The rent for the furnished one-bedroom unit was affordable, and I would frequently spend my time out on the balcony, just sitting, watching. I didn't have a TV, and I never found the Internet interesting. My co-workers would sometimes invite me out for a beer with the gang, but I would politely decline. Eventually they stopped asking.

The only times I would leave my apartment would be to get groceries. I ate well, cooking my own meals and avoiding fast food. You can't go through a drive-thru if you don't have a car. The city bus got me to work on time, though I would keep my eyes low to avoid meeting the gaze of the other public transit-takers. Some of those people really creeped me out.

I met Christine at the grocery store. She was pretty; a slim brown-haired girl with glasses and a cute turned-up nose. We collided as I came around a corner, hands full of produce. As we helped pick up each other's groceries, we noticed the similarities in our choices: lean ground beef, potato soup, and lots of vegetables and fruit. She also had Rolo™ ice cream, my one indulgence. Our eyes met and something electric passed between us.

The next few months were a blur. I went out to more movies and restaurants with her than I had in my entire life up to that point. Eventually, though, our passions cooled. I didn't want to spend much time at her place. She had a nice apartment, but it didn't even have a balcony! I didn't know how she could live there, and tried to convince her to move in with me. She said my place was too small, and smelled funny. I didn't know what she was talking about.

Eventually we broke up, over nothing. Only a couple weeks later, though, I called her up and we were back together again. I suppose I missed the sex. She had been my first, though I wasn't hers. I didn't know how to meet other girls, so I went back to her. However, there was something missing this time. I couldn't put my finger on it.

Things coasted along for awhile until she sat me down one day and told me she was pregnant. I didn't know what to say. We had used condoms every time, so it didn't make sense. I told her I would have to think about it and she left crying.

The next day I got a call from a woman at the hospital. Actually, she sounded a little young to be a nurse but I didn't notice at the time. She said Christine had been in a car accident and was I sitting down? She was sorry, but Christine had died from her wounds and my number had been in her purse. I didn't say anything. "Hello? Hello?" she said. I put down the receiver and went out to my patio. I sat there all night, looking down at the trees, watching their branches sway as the cool breeze rolled through them. Dying leaves floated to the ground. Winter was coming.

I called in sick all of the next week. I never called in sick, so work didn't question me on it. I spent all of my time on my balcony, watching the birds as they winged their way south. It's amazing, how they maintain that "V" formation for such long distances.

It rained on the 8th day. My patio had an overhang, so it kept me dry. Sometimes I would stand at the railing and when the wind bore my way the spray would wash my face. As the drops rolled down my cheeks it felt very much like tears. Cold tears.

I went back to work. I did my job. Nobody noticed anything was different. Same old, same old.

Weeks passed. I went out to find a Christmas present for my mother. She still lived in that apartment on the far side of town, with her boyfriend Bob, or was it Bill? Whatever. While I was walking through the mall I could have sworn I saw Christine on the upper level, pushing a baby stroller. I raced up the escalator, but when I got there she was gone. I was seeing things. I put it out of my mind.

The government instituted the "do not call" list, and the company's prospects had dried up quickly. The people in charge didn't want to chance governmental fines, so we were ordered to start calling Canada. I noticed I had the same amount of immediate hang-ups once I identified myself and who I worked for, but there was a lot less swearing.

One lady I called said she found our product fascinating, but didn't want to deal with an American company. She was upset over Bush being reelected after what she called "outright lies and warmongering". She was afraid of what the world would become in the next four years because of it.

I explained that I hadn't even voted, and if I had, it certainly wouldn't have been for Bush. She became very quiet, then asked me to never call again. Stupid woman.

I took some more time off, spending all day and night on my balcony. The squirrels were still collecting their nuts and stashing them all around the courtyard. A bird must have lost its bearings and smashed into a window across the way. The sound of its impact woke me up. My head felt fuzzy and as I looked at the bloody smear on the window across from me, and I could swear I saw a baby's face looking back. *Et tu, Rorschach?*

I shivered and pulled the sleeping bag tighter around me. I had pulled it out of storage a few days back when the temperature took a sudden drop. My breath, now wheezing, produced a pitiful plume of fog. My nose was running. I really was sick, and I didn't have any more sick days to spare.

I went back to work, feeling terrible. I don't normally get sick, so the discomfort made me quite crabby. I tried to tell a caller about my balcony and how it made me feel and he said something which I won't repeat in civilized conversation. I yelled at him and he hung up.

My manager called me into his office a little later and yelled at me for about 15 minutes, and then he fired me. I had worked there for five years by that time. Burnout, he said. It happens to all telemarketers eventually.

I returned home to find a notice from the apartment manager. The building was going to be torn down in favor of a strip mall, and would I kindly make alternate living arrangements by the end of the month? My rent agreement stipulated that they only had to give 15 days notice, and it was already the 15th.

The snow started to fall. I made sure to keep my eyes open so I wouldn't miss any of it. The suffuse glow of the cityscape near the apartment building provided enough light for me to see the fluffy flakes as they came down at night. As I stood at the railing I felt the occasional flake lightly touch my face. As they melted they felt like tears. Cold tears.

I had fallen asleep again. It was morning, and someone was yelling at me from downstairs. I stirred and went to the railing. It was the manager. He had pounded on my door but I didn't answer, he yelled. The construction workers had already set up in the courtyard and were going to start tearing it up. Why hadn't I moved out yet? I only had a couple days left!

I waved to him and sank back into my chair. Sleep took me again.

Night had fallen by the time I woke up next. They had torn up the tree closest to my side of the courtyard. The ground where it had been looked angry in the gloom of night, outraged that they would uproot such a majestic being, so much older than these momentary creatures; these humans. What had the tree ever done to them?

I looked at my balcony. Mine. It WAS mine. I thought about it long and hard, then went back inside to look in my storage closet. Was it still there?

Yes. I knew what I had to do.

I woke to the sound of my door splintering. I had piled the furniture in front of it, so I would have a few minutes.

I carefully rolled up the sleeping bag. I had shaved just a couple hours before. My face always looked younger when I kept it smooth. I ran my fingers through my hair, adjusted my clothes and waited, facing the balcony door.

The building manager came into the room with some paper in his hand, probably my eviction notice. He had the police with him.

No yelling this time. No carrying on.

I stamped my feet.

The bolts holding the balcony to the building, which I had painstakingly loosened with the tools in the set my Dad had given me years ago, creaked and buckled. The building manager and the police officers backed off quickly, the manager's face turning ashen. I turned from the balcony door, put my hands on the railing and looked out over the snowy vista. The flakes landed on my face and melted.

The squirrels were safe in their hidey-holes. The birds were enjoying themselves down south. The kids had moved on, and the bumblebees were waiting out the cold in their hives. The world would carry on. It was bigger than all this.

With a cracking sound, the balcony came loose. I smiled.

I was home.