THE TENANTS OF MOONBLOOM

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ONE

LASHED IN THE twisted phone wire, Norman was a victim of his own tendency to fool around, but, finally anchored, he became quiet. His brother's voice was a record played at the wrong speed, reminding him unnecessarily who he was. It could have been the voice on one of those primitive recording ribbons used as a novelty in greeting cards or children's cheap toys, which emit a shallow resemblance to human speech when you run your nail over their ridges. Yet there was no real loss of fidelity; even in Irwin's presence Norman felt his brother to be something that was played over and over again. For a number of years he had been away from the powerful incoherence of that voice, but, pathetically, now that he was back, he admitted there was a perverse comfort in its demands.

"We don't rannana rannana, Norman. You can't keep rannana rannana. You've got to rannana rannana rannana and rannana. Responsibility rannana rannana. I am rannana rannana constantly. Rannana rannana rannana . . ."

The wire held him to the phone and thus to the swivel chair and thus to the warped floor, connected him to the dented file cabinets and the desk with its veneer shrunken away like dead skin. There was a cat smell and dust between his teeth.

"I rannana rannana rannana all rannana rannana. *Rannana* rannana rannana! Rannana rannana rannana . . .

Norman risked putting the phone on his shoulder; he would

know his own cue to speak by the suffocated pitch. He sat between daydream and nothing, looking at what was to be seen. The sunlight had to bend to get down there. Bounced from the sidewalk above, it had almost the look of artificial light. People's headless bodies were a tantalizing parade, and only the children were whole. Idle as he was at that moment, it was some effort for him to resist complete abstraction. He was a hall of mirrors; within him his dream was an infinite series of reflections and all he could be sure of was that it existed and made him sure that *he* existed.

"Rannana?"

He became alert.

"Norman, are you listening?"

"Of course," he said without alarm. He knew that his lines didn't depend upon what his brother had been saying.

"The thing is, Irwin, in spite of all that . . . On Thirteenth Street," he said, hearing his brother's powerful breathlessness, "the roof leaks so badly that the rats are leaving the building. Then there are the toilets on the second and third floor—they're backing up, and the whole house smells. That's a real emergency, of course. But the stair banister between the first and second floor finally fell off altogether. The furnace hasn't been fixed yet and here it is October. Old Karloff on the first floor leaves food around, and the place is filled with *la cucaracha.* Del Rio threatens to call the Department of Sanitation. Oh, and there are now *no* lights in the hallways—that was the last fixture. Then there's a hole in the third-floor hallway floor, six inches wide. I can't imagine how it got there, but it's there. Oh yes, and some kids broke a pane in the front door." He paused only for breath, but Irwin jumped in.

"Broke a window!" The delicate diaphragm reverberated in the receiver. "Norman, you've got to be more alert!"

"Alert," Norman repeated, smiling helplessly at his grotto.

"Yes, alert. I *depend* on you to take care of all those details. God knows *I* can't be bothered with that nonsense. You are supposed to run just those four houses, collect the rent, take care of the few managerial details. I am involved with much more complicated transactions—*I* certainly can't take time out from these much more important things to worry about cockroaches and toilets, now can I, Norm?" He was so reasonable that Norman was tempted to kiss the mouthpiece.

"Certainly not, Irwin."

"Now I'm not saying that I *invented* the job for you, but there certainly wouldn't be any point to my keeping the houses if you weren't there to handle it. I'm not being unreasonable now, am I, Normy?"

"Who ever said . . ."

"It isn't too much for me to expect you to free me from those little things, is it?"

"No, Irwin." He tried it again silently, exaggerating the movements of his lips.

"I mean, I deal in transactions that run upwards of six figures. I carry my work home with me. My work is never done. The pressures on me are rannana."

Norman smiled at the slip into sermon.

"How in the world can you allow windows to get broken, Norman?"

"Allow?"

"It aggravates me no end."

"Tell me why you jumped at the window? I told you the whole building is . . ."

"Some things cannot be helped. Call them acts of God."

"So why not windows too?"

"Norman, I have no time to quibble. Just take care of those petty things without calling me. Don't you have *any* initiative?"

"Initiative I could perhaps dig up. But, Irwin, for the roof,

the banister, the plumbing, the electricity, for those things I need money."

"You know you have complete freedom to write checks on that corporation's account. I give you complete freedom of action on that. It isn't necessary to call me every time you want to buy a bulb."

"Blood from a stone, Irwin. The cupboard is bare, empty, depleted. In fact, it is below zero—I owe a two-dollar fine for overdrawing."

"Oh *Norman!*"

"I know, I'm a crazy spendthrift, I spend on blondes and the race track."

"I'm not saying that. But you *are* a poor manager."

"And I owe Gaylord."

"Gaylord is a shiftless *shwartsa.* He's not worth anything."

"That is irrelevant. For forty dollars a week you don't get a professional to take care of four buildings."

"Do you realize that my time is worth fifty dollars an *hour?* This conversation must have cost thirty-five dollars."

Norman waited a few minutes out of respect. Then in a gentle voice he continued. "Now, on Seventieth Street the elevator didn't pass inspection and the water is rusty in all the kitchen faucets. On Second Avenue the wiring is so bad that the inspector wouldn't take a bribe, said he drew the line at murder."

"Stop it, Norman."

"On Mott Street there is imminent disaster. The wall is swelling next to the toilet—it's going to collapse on poor Basellecci. Also, the grace period on the insurance is up at the end of the week . . ."

"God damn it, Norman!"

"Then there are the appliances on Seventieth Street. Jacoby's—no, it was Hauser's—I think. . . . Anyhow, there are several stoves that don't work, and one . . ."

"Just shut up! I'll put five hundred dollars in the account tomorrow morning, and then do not let me hear from you for a long, long time!"

The tiny click in the receiver couldn't begin to suggest the force with which Irwin must have slammed down the phone. Norman felt a certain sense of nobility in putting *his* phone back on the cradle with exquisite delicacy. Then he had to smile wanly at the dusty, secondhand sunlight and the misspelled obscenities chalked in the well his office rested in.

"Five hundred dollars," he said in the tone of a man echoing his doctor's grim prediction. "Five hun-dred dollars." Still, it was only a minor plaint; he was not prone to self-pity but did allow a certain humorous sympathy for himself. He opened his palm as though testing for rain. He shrugged. Finally he took out one of the several ball-point pens in his shirt pocket and began trying to assign priorities for the things he had to do. Ten things were tied for first place, and he approximated the estimated costs.

A few people put on heads and peered down at him from the sidewalk above. They were attracted by his being behind glass, but more, perhaps, because they were drawn to the black letters on the window, letters that struck the ear of the eye with a softly melancholy and alliterative note.

I. MOONBLOOM REALTY CORP.
Norman Moonbloom—Agent

From his side of the glass, Norman always saw in the letters a resemblance to the Russian alphabet, and noticed too how the family name was almost symmetrical, with the same OO on either side of the terse NBL—like bookends. But right then he was not inclined to muse. He was trying to divide a huge number into a tiny one, and the sweat stood out on his small, gambler-white face with its blue-tinted cheeks and chin, its large pregnant-woman eyes. The effort was painful,

and he bit his thin, childlike mouth. Suddenly the obvious simile occurred to him, and he put down the pen to laugh wretchedly. "Like an elephant trying to make love to a mouse," he said aloud. His humor made him close his eyes, as against the splashing of some caustic liquid.

The watered-down sunlight laid the window letters in a ribbon of shadow over floor and desk and man. One of the many O's made a daguerreotype of his blinded face. There had been no horrors in his life—only a slow widening of sensitivity. But he anticipated reaching the threshold of pain one of these days. It was like the fear of death; he could ignore it most of the time, although it was implacably there, to touch him with the very tip of its claw in moments of frustration, to bring dread to him during the 4:00 A.M. bladder call. The claw withdrew after just a touch, leaving him with a chronic, unrecognizable din that he did not think about; he was like a man who lives beside a foaming cataract and comes to take its roar for silence.

The thought came to him that he might find solutions if he changed pace. He resolutely opened his eyes. "I'll get a head start on myself, I'll start with the rents tonight. Yes, the rents," he said. He stood up to five feet seven inches, and the O now made a target of his chest.

His eyes crept over the small office; as always, he was slightly chagrined at the realization that his occupation had no real equipment beyond the receipt book and the ball-point pens. Still, his rather sad expression held no trace of bitterness. He had been a student until his thirty-second year, mainly because both he and his brother had been unable to see him as anything else. But a year ago he had closed the podiatry book with quiet finality: his last major after accounting, art, literature, dentistry, and the rabbinate. It had become clear to him that whatever talents he might have, he

would never learn a special skill. Irwin had taken a grandfather's inheritance in cash; Norman had taken his in an unbroken string of semesters, fourteen years long. Now he worked for his brother at a small salary. Yet he sensed that justice had been done, and, optimistically, he wasn't convinced that *his* use of the money mightn't pay off in some oblique way. He worked too hard, even sharing some of the menial labor with the roving superintendent, Gaylord Knight, yet he felt that it would take a lot to extinguish him.

Wandering over to the file cabinet, he wrote "Astolat" with his finger in the dust on its top. The finished word made the shabby showcase of an office into a queer place; the sheafs of bills and receipts, spiked or corralled in several "In" boxes, became cryptic symbols. He smiled, creasing his blackish eyelids and lifting his long-lobed ears (he could wiggle them at will). The walls were a fleshy pink and made of embossed tin like a cooky box. The linoleum was worn to a dirty hair color and was patched here and there with unevenly cut rectangles against the inroads of mice.

He spent a minute touching a few things on his desk. Then he put on his hat, a pearl-gray fedora with an immense crown and brim that made him look like a child imitating a gangster. He put on his suit jacket (also too large for his thin, slight body) and tucked the receipt book in its breast pocket.

Outside, in the pungency of the worn air, he sighed with premonitory tiredness. He locked the door, went up the steps, and headed for the subway that would take him to the upper West Side of town. He walked lightly and his face showed no awareness of all the thousands of people around him because he traveled in an eggshell through which came only subdued light and muffled sound.

TWO

HE WENT INTO the lobby and frowned at the new markings penciled on the walls. The refectory furniture disapproved, too, and the phony arches seemed threatened by the reality of the present. He kicked testingly at a loosened octagon of tile, peered up at the one bulb in the manorial chandelier. In the elevator he listened to the noisy motor and tried not to read the notice that said the elevator had not passed inspection. Rising in the slapping whine, he settled as usual for that modest ascent; he considered his ups and and downs insignificant. Someone had scratched "Emperors" on the spackled wall next to an old, already rusting drawing of male and female genitals. He sighed and looked upward. The life in the building moved dimly around him like the pulsing movement perceived through new ice.

"The rent," he said in no particular way when the anemic-looking youth opened the door.

"Oh yeah, just a minute," Lester said, half letting him in and tucking back his long pompadoured hair. "Aunt Min, the rent," he called over his shoulder.

"Right in the middle of everything," Minna said in an undertone; her mottled baby face was spongey under the powder and rouge. "Come in, come in. Sit down. I'll have to get the . . ." She took the rest of the sentence into her bedroom as her sister, Eva, stepped out of the kitchen with a dish towel.

"Hello," Norman said to her.

"Does that sign on the elevator mean it's not safe?" Eva had the face of an old squaw and beauty-parlor blue hair. She squinted, deepening her self-made wrinkles.

"Just a technicality." Norman sat brightly institutional, his gangster hat on his knee.

"I'd hate to fall into the basement on a *technicality,*" Lester said, raising an eyebrow. As Beloved Nephew, he knew his audience.

His aunt Eva laughed with her hand up to her mouth; there was a sex shyness in her attitude, the look of a young woman with her lover who suddenly finds her situation excitingly altered by the presence of a stranger. It was not at all funny with that rugged Iroquois face of hers.

Her sister came back into the room with her pocketbook. "What's funny?" Minna asked, looking to choose sides. And then seeing that it had to do with Lester, she threw aside reservation and made ready to laugh wholeheartedly.

"Mr. Moonbloom said the sign on the elevator was just a technicality, and Lester said, 'I'd hate to fall into the basement on a *technicality.*' "

Minna smiled, and her feeling was so strong that she had to pat down a stray tuft of hair on her nephew's head. "*Les*ter," she said.

The two sisters ran their eyes through the head of the reedy, soft-soaked-looking young man, who stood with apparent insouciance between them. Norman could see, however, that the angle of his weak head was determined by the line of their common glance. Lester stretched like a pet cat. The light came through a bulb-burned lamp shade and cast old-penny color over the three of them. Norman checked the ceiling for falling plaster amidst their antique silence. A tiny mark showed on the shell of his consciousness. His big hat moistened in his hand.

"Well," he said in subtle consolation.

Minna took a breath that seemed to make a snapping sound. "I suppose we'd just better pay the man," she said.

"That's the idea," Lester said, jabbing adorably at his older aunt.

"Oh, *Les*ter," Eva said. Like her sister, she could not say the name without feeling.

The light in there was like a smell, and when Norman got out into the hallway he took a deep breath and let it out a little at a time.

"Come in, young man. Make yourself at home." Arnold Jacoby had a soldering iron in his hand. Toylike and small, he seemed heated up by the tool, and his old face was rosy. "Setting up for supper. Maybe you'll join us? Betty doesn't fuss. At our age, Campbell's soup fills the bill. It's just a question of opening another can. Nothing to it. Love to have you."

"Well, that's very nice of you, but I have a lot of calls . . ." For some reason he pictured himself on errands of mercy in the midst of a plague. He patted the breast pocket, checking or indicating the receipt book there.

"Nonsense. Cup of instant coffee? Young fella like you can't be in all *that* much of a hurry!"

"Well I . . ."

"I mean you get to *our* age . . . you *should* hurry then. I mean, to put it in terms of *your* profession . . . I like to talk the other fella's language—kind of indicates a little interest in what the other fella does, you know? Like I talk to the kids, I try to throw in a little of their talk. Cool, man, like crazy, hah? Well, you know what I mean. So to get back to your profession, I'll put it in your terms. At my age you have to think in *short-term leases. . . .*" He chuckled modestly. "Yeh, yeh, *short-term leases.*"

Norman heh-heh'ed politely, his hands out in an inconspicuous breast stroke.

"Oh, not that we let it get us down. We keep busy. *Betty!*" he roared suddenly, making Norman feel for a moment that he had walked into a trap. "For instance, I'm a modelmaker by trade—work for a big outfit, doing all their model work. But on my own time I do a little puttering." He looked up with a coy, provocative expression.

"Puttering?" Norman said.

Apparently it had been delivered in just the right tone of voice. The old, toylike face colored pleasurably. "Ah, ah hah," he said, waving a finger, arch now, convinced he had Norman panting with curiosity. He was something of a tease, but his teasing had been dragged a long way without getting rough, so you knew that it had never been cruelty.

"Betty!" he roared again. This time Norman only twitched slightly. Arnold Jacoby pushed him into a flowered armchair that embraced him like quicksand. "Well I'll tell you what I putter with. I *invent* things. I'm an inventor!"

"My, my," Norman said, furtively drawing the receipt book out. He waited a courteous few seconds and then, just as Arnold's mouth started to fit qualifying words, said "One of these days you'll have to tell me more about it. I'd love to hear about it now, but I have a few things to take care . . . Let's see, I make it out to be sixty-three dollars and twenty cents, right, Mr. Jacoby?"

"Call me Arnold—makes me feel more part of things. I'm seventy-three, but 'Mr. Jacoby' still sounds like my father. Dead a half-century this February. Oh, fine man, fine man. Great respecter of the human mind and spirit. Nothing crass about that man. 'Course it made him a failure—same as me. But then, I don't think you're a failure if to your own self you're true."