

# At Humble Housing

Judy Kohler

People in depression country have a grapevine that taps into government projects. The houses were going up out in the cow pasture, and every freeloader within fifty miles knew about it but Rosalie. She was too green at getting aid. Welfare would do things like send her to the city attorney about collecting child support, but that was a joke.

"They'll be slums inside of six months, Tommy says," Tricia told Rosalie. "But for a little while at least, you and Joey could have something nice."

Joey and Rosalie were living in a garage apartment then. The gas stove in the living room had singed the hair off the back of Joey's head. Every night Rosalie went to bed sure in her heart that the little half couch fold-out that Joey slept on would be his funeral pyre, back in the bitter frigid January. Around midnight she'd scoop him up, sleeping, and transfer him to her bed. Then she'd lie there and think about being gassed or fried until she fell asleep.

Going up in flames stopped being Rosalie's biggest worry when March came and brought a few days of oppressive sultriness. As cold as that dump had been in winter, its worst feature was going to be its potential for baking them through the spring and summer. It was the kind of place Ma used to talk about, places like she lived in when times were tough.

"Nights would be so hot I'd have to wet sheets in the tub and cover us up, me and Hoyle," she'd say. Ma loved to tell stories about hard times. "Those sheets dried out so quick even in that humidity, Lord God! I might get up four or five more times to wet us down again."

It turned out the goddamned place *was* the one Ma had lived in. Rosalie went to her to try to establish a civil relationship. Fucking doctors didn't know how crazy they drove old people on blood pressure pills. Wouldn't care if they did know. Ma consented frostily to come to Rosalie's apartment for a cup of coffee. She cast a nostalgic eye over the grease-encrusted kitchen with its single electrical outlet where the old refrigerator labored. You could see her mind was all those years back, herself a young wife. "Yes, this was the kitchen where I took in ironing." That was Rosalie's mother. Always had to go her one better.

So Tricia's idea about Humble Housing seemed like an excellent one to Rosalie. She didn't see how Tricia's husband, Tommy, could be so sure they'd be slums inside of six months. Maybe compared to his big air conditioned house. Rosalie took a few minutes off work and dashed out to

the housing development springing up in the red mud to put in her application. Rosalie's income was low enough to qualify her, but Chickasaws were to be first on the list, then other Indian tribes, followed by poor whites. But the administrator admitted there were vacancies available. Shouldn't take more than thirty days, maybe less.

"You got a five-year-old, I see. A boy. Well, too bad. Government regulations. If the child was female, I could bend the rules a little. We could move you into a one-bedroom unit and wait for the two-bedroom to open up."

Joey and Rosalie could have been cuddling up together on the street, but government regulations said they could not share a bedroom. A woman just barely competent to handle the paper work was the only Indian on the premises. Not one Indian had applied to live in Humble Housing. They must have had too much pride, Rosalie thought.

Joey and Rosalie stuck it out in the garage apartment and made it to the windy March day when they could move into their duplex in the project that looked all bright and spanking, sitting in its sea of red mud. The money ran out before they'd gotten to the landscaping. The sidewalk sank at an angle that turned towards their front door. The talkative old man from the duplex across the mud sea told Rosalie that the spring rains would wash red mud ankle deep, sluicing across their sidewalk and making their entrance impassable.

"I take a shovel to it when it's that way," he said, "but ain't nobody else around here gonna do a thing. I always believed in helpin' out. I'll be scoopin' mud offen it whenever I see it's washed out. But I've been to the manager time and time over. They 'uz supposed to put in grass, but that ain't gonna happen. Not this year."

Tricia marched back and forth in the flat-out prairie wind, carrying things she'd been saving to furnish Rosalie's new house, and Rosalie had housekeeping set up so well she made them a plate of fudge. They didn't get to eat it because Rosalie was working so fast she threw the fudge into the refrigerator and it slid off its plate.

March turned cold again that night, and the central heat poured warm air from registers. Rosalie felt like a queen in a palace. Joey was asleep in his bed in his own room. People at work had been so generous. Rosalie had left all she owned behind in her escape from Joey's father. Her co-workers had given her linens and dishes and anything they thought she could use, things they'd been storing for garage sales. One woman gave her a bed for Joey. He hadn't had a bed of his own in almost a year. People could be so good.

Rosalie's new duplex turned out cute. Somehow the bits and pieces of furniture and household goods blended into a yellow color scheme. Yellow

in the house meant sunshine to Rosalie. Unaccountably, the contractors had chosen white tile for the floors, but with a single-minded vigilance Rosalie swept the minute she got home every day and mopped and waxed every night.

Making a nest for Joey, that was Rosalie's entertainment. Poor Joey had almost none. She was as vigilant about his playmates as she was about that white tile floor. She didn't know what else to do. The neighbors had plunged Rosalie into a bad case of culture shock. A little four-year-old named D.J. stood outside Rosalie's front door and shrieked obscenities. And he and his sister, Cissy, were the only ones she did trust to associate with Joey. They had a certain innocence and vulnerability about them the other children seemed to have buried long ago.

"My daddy smokes dope! And he gives it to me too!" D.J. screamed, standing on Rosalie's concrete slab porch. He followed that up with a string of unrelated curses. He was angry that Joey had been temporarily banned from playing with him. D.J. had enticed Joey to leave his own yard area—into danger, where the bad kids played.

"Where the Lorax once stood/for as long as it could/until somebody lifted the Lorax away," Rosalie chanted desperately. Joey's favorite Dr. Seuss book was *The Lorax*.

Sometimes Tricia left Tommy alone to watch football in his underwear. She'd take all the cigarettes and the keys to his car and sit and smoke with Rosalie and eat cookies.

"You know, Oprah says if you suspect child abuse and don't report it, you're as guilty as the abusers." Rosalie didn't want to make this decision without Tricia's advice.

Tricia didn't think Rosalie should call the Welfare. "They didn't help *you*, did they?" she asked.

"No. But I wouldn't be asking for anything for myself."

Tricia laughed scornfully and reached for another cookie. "Try *Christians Concerned*," she suggested.

But what if D.J. got hurt? What if it was Joey? Rosalie called the Welfare. "I want to report . . . uh, I think there is some child abuse in my neighborhood," Rosalie told them. They were interested this time. Child abuse got their attention. They took Rosalie's name and called her back at work to make sure she wasn't a crank caller.

People seldom knocked on Rosalie's duplex door at Humble Housing. Whenever Tricia came by, she called out Rosalie's name as she approached. After a neighbor got shot by her brother-in-law, it occurred to Rosalie that Tricia must be picturing her and Joey dead every time she came to check on them. So when this knock came at the door, Rosalie was

a little apprehensive. What possible *good* news could be coming for her and Joey?

It was D.J.'s and Cissy's mother in her flowered dress, with her long straight blonde hair in braids. Rosalie knew who she was because she'd come before, to tell Rosalie that Joey had been seen stomping through her vegetable garden. He'd been seen and reported by neighbor women. "My husband, he'll be so *mad*," the woman had said.

*They lived in a cow pasture!* Rosalie thought. Just across the fence were actual cows. Gourds grew wild, but there was no such thing as a vegetable garden in those hillocks of red mud with duplexes for Indians planted in them and rain gullies scarring their sides.

The hillbilly woman seemed dull, flat somehow, almost two-dimensional, but she didn't seem angry. "I come to see if you know anything about somebody reportin' us to the Welfare?" she asked.

"To the Welfare?" Rosalie repeated, like she couldn't even imagine what welfare was. "What for?" Down the street, she could see slatterns standing and watching at their open doors.

"I asked, and some of these other ladies," she said, waving vaguely behind her, "said you'd be the only one woulda reported me to the Welfare."

Rosalie gave a completely unconvincing gasp.

"'Cause my husband smokes dope," the woman added helpfully.

"My God, no, I wouldn't have called the Welfare," Rosalie lied.

"About D.J. and Cissy? Why would anybody do that?"

The woman shrugged and kind of sagged. "I doan know," she said.

Rosalie invited her to come in, since every trouble-maker in the neighborhood was still watching. Once the woman was inside, she pretty much belonged to Rosalie. She looked around timidly at Rosalie's clean white floor and the ruffled yellow dotted-swiss curtains. "Who would have done a thing like that?" Rosalie asked again, trying to make sure her act was working. "What did they say?"

"Said my husband was givin' dope to D.J.," the woman said. "I just doan know what I'm gonna do. I got me a job at the Pizza Hut, but that lady from the Welfare, she said if I ain't got nobody to look after D.J. and Cissy, I'll be in trouble. Guess I'll have to give up my job, 'cause I ain't got nobody but my husband to look after the kids." She looked a little hopeful. Maybe Rosalie would offer to look after D.J. and Cissy so she could work.

"Well, you just can't get anywhere, can you?" Rosalie said. She was really starting to feel sorry for this woman. "You get a job and they won't let you keep it."

"That's right. Just for gettin' a job, they might take my kids away from me. And I sure doan want that to happen again."

"You lost them before?" Rosalie was shocked. She was falling right into this role. Them against the Man. "D.J. and Cissy? But they're too little to leave their mother!"

"Oh, yes," said the dispirited woman. "They kept Cissy till she was eighteen months old. That's one of the reasons we left Florida."

"You came from Florida," Rosalie repeated.

"Uh-huh."

"Why did they take her?"

"Oh, just 'cause I dropped her. When she was three months old. You know how you just reach out to grab 'em, when you drop 'em?" She demonstrated how a person might drop a three-month-old baby and reach out to grab its arm. "I just reached out like that and it broke her arm. I'd rather her arm was broke than let her fall. But they took her away till she was eighteen months old."

Rosalie's vigilance grew fiercer when Joey was outside playing; her terror when he got out of sight exploded into spankings until he sobbed, "Mom, you got to get me a house with a fence."

D.J. and Cissy were still the best playmates at Humble Housing. But they were free to roam, and they got tired of playing with Joey. So much of the time he was left alone, and Rosalie would be furiously chanting *The Lorax* to him.

Then a little girl moved into the duplex attached to Rosalie's, a small girl who seemed content to play quietly at home. Gabrielle had large brown eyes and a strangely womanly haircut with neat bangs and a straight part. Her round face was sweet and solemn. She didn't seem to be a threat at all, but she drew little boys like a magnet. Rosalie never figured that out, how it was that those signals went out or what the signals were. But men knew, boys knew, when the signals were working. Gabrielle was suddenly the most popular kid at Humble Housing. All she did as far as Rosalie could see, was play with dolls on the sidewalk. Boys of all ages clustered around, and they all seemed to know Gabrielle's name.

Rosalie thought maybe she just had that new-kid-on-the-block appeal. She felt safe when Joey went to play with Gabrielle. But he came back one evening with his troubled look—the little dent in his forehead. "Gabrielle's not there?" she asked him.

"She's there," he said.

"Who else is there?" asked Rosalie.

"Her baby sitter," he said.

"You don't like her?"

"It's a he. I don't like him," he said. He patted the crown of his head. "He squirted milk at me, Mom."

It wasn't the words, it was the way he said them. Rosalie knew something about that baby sitter had struck Joey as undignified. Joey had something wet and sticky in his hair. She didn't want to know what it was. His troubled look was enough. Joey knew what was right and what was odd. And Joey, lonely as he was, didn't want to play with Gabrielle any more.

His playmate list was blank. He would drag a chair to the kitchen window and look out, muttering, "There's that D.J. and Cissy. I hate that D.J. and Cissy." But sometimes he'd turn and ask, "Can I go play with them?"

Nights were long, and as summer heat clamped down they got longer. Rosalie sat up smoking late; sleeping in the damp heat was not an option. She tried to stop smoking, and one night when she hadn't had a cigarette in two days, she found herself knocking on the talkative old man's door. She asked for the loan of a pack of cigarettes, and he grabbed her wrist and pulled her inside. He said he'd give her a whole carton, and his wet mouth touched hers before she could turn her head. "I'd sure like to get acquainted with you!" he kept saying. But he was old, and Rosalie was strong.

She sat up in the humid night and stared at the bottom of the back door, at the crack between it and the jamb. On the back porch one morning she'd found the dry husk of the skin of a snake. The houses were flush on the ground, no foundations, no platforms. Coming home one day, she'd surprised something gray and furry and huge gnawing at the plaster around the frame of the front door. It was as if no particular animal was higher than another, all of them living in that pasture together.

Joey was lucky he could sleep through so much of the bad times. But he didn't feel lucky. It would be still light outside in high summer, and Joey could hear kids laughing and shrieking. Sometimes he'd ask plaintively, "Why do I have to go to bed, Mom? Kids are still playing. It's still day."

Eight o'clock was his bedtime, and there was no relaxing the rules. How Rosalie saw it, every time she tucked him in was one more day she'd got him through safely. And twilight, to Rosalie, twilight was the time kids slipped out of your control. She could remember her own mother calling on a summer night, herself playing a block away, not answering. Twilight. And an old man under a bridge.

"I know, baby. Some kids don't have parents that love them enough to see they get to bed on time. But you've got me."

"Don't cover me up, Mom. You'll fussicate me."

But kids should have been asleep by midnight. She'd sit in the dark smoking and listen to Gabrielle through the open windows, crying, pleading, "Please don't do that. Please don't do that." What was she going to do, call the Welfare?