



'How You Doing, Baby?'

Learning to get on with the neighbors in Oak Park, Ill.

By **RACHEL LOUISE SNYDER**

One fall evening in 1995, I dialed the number of a woman who rented an apartment in the building I had just begun managing in Oak Park. Oak Park, home to Hemingway and Frank Lloyd Wright, is known for its progressive housing policies and integration efforts, especially around Austin Boulevard, which was three blocks away from my building and divides Oak Park from Chicago. The West Side of Chicago is famous, too — for gangs, for drugs, for crime. And before that, for discriminatory housing practices. But Oak Park created a series of programs based on the Fair Housing Act of 1968 as a way to right the wrongs of housing discrimination, including creating my job as a resident manager.

I was fresh out of grad school and thrilled, as a writer, to have free rent. My visible job was to clean the building, show apartments, escort workmen and circulate rent notices; the invisible part was to create community among different races, different economic scales, different cultures. Eventually, I would hold potlucks at my apartment, plan camping trips, create a laundry-room library and plant a communal herb garden.

But this was my first week on the job and one of my first calls to a tenant. All I knew was that she was twice my age and had lived in the building for more than 10 years.

I was calling to ask her to remove several garbage bags sitting on her back deck. This was a building violation, but that mattered little to me. What did matter was that garbage attracted vermin — specifically rats, mice and possums — and I was masking my blind terror of possums in the convenient bureaucracy of “building rules and regulations.” I had already had a run-in with a beady-eyed possum on a back porch one night. The possum was of that unsettling urban variety, too tough for mere humans. It casually sauntered away.

I introduced myself over the phone. “We’ve had a problem lately,” I said, “with rats and mice, so if you don’t mind, could you keep your garbage from sitting on the back porch?” I suggested she leave it in her house until she was ready to take it to the alley Dumpsters.

She breathed heavily on the other line. Finally she said, “Ain’t

no little white girl gonna tell me what to do with my garbage.” Then she hung up. I began to shake. I was just doing my job. Couldn’t she see the necessity of such a policy? And what did my race have to do with it? In that moment, the complexities and nuances of the job became clear.

One afternoon, months after my phone call with her, I escorted the exterminator from apartment to apartment. I was nervous about entering hers; we had never met face to face. To be honest, I was trying every possible means of avoiding her. I had, by now, befriended many of my neighbors and made visible improvements around the building, but she hadn’t attended any of my events, for which I was secretly thankful.

At her door, I knocked timidly, half hoping she wasn’t home. From inside, I heard her say: “I’m coming. Hold up.” She swung open the door with a huge grin. “How you doing, baby?” she asked me, as if we were best friends. I was so shocked by this greeting that I froze, until she said, “Come on in, now.” She showed the exterminator her kitchen. As

she walked, I could see her limping — she was extremely overweight — and when she pointed to an area where she thought the cockroaches might enter, she held on to the counter for stability. Her apartment was spotless: white living-room furniture covered in plastic, not a speck of dust on her coffee table. The stainless-steel kitchen sink shone like new. It was the cleanest, tidiest apartment of any I had seen, and I understood then what an affront it must have seemed to suggest that she keep a bag of garbage inside her house for a minute longer than she had to.

While the exterminator sprayed, she asked me how I was getting on and whether I was enjoying the job. She never mentioned our phone conversation. She told me if I ever had any trouble, to come talk with her, that she was there for me. She told me I was on her prayer roster. The garden I planted looked pretty, she said.

She never did take her garbage to the Dumpster. I constantly saw it there, on her back porch, beckoning possums. I thought of her bad knees, her labored breathing. I carried it down for her. From inside her apartment, occasionally, I would hear, “Thank ya, baby.” ♦

Rachel Louise Snyder’s novel “What We’ve Lost Is Nothing,” set in Oak Park, is forthcoming from Scribner in January.

ILLUSTRATION BY MELINDA JOSIE

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