

Hi Samantha,

June 30, 2019 (May letter)

After your furnace encounters with the people upstairs I thought you might appreciate hearing our neighbour story.

It took place in the house where we lived when your mother was born. It was a big old house on Montcalm St. in Vancouver, about 4 or 5 blocks from my parents' apartment in Marpole (see photo). We rented the main floor with one room for our bedroom and another office/bedroom for us and Daegan.



There was also a suite in the basement. It was occupied by a young couple who we assumed were married. They entered their suite through a side door and small entrance-way vestibule that contained our washer and dryer along with a laundry tub much like the one in the 48th street place.

They seemed like a nice young couple, so when they asked us if they could use the laundry tub for doing their dishes (because the sink in their suite was too small, they claimed), we were quick to agree. We also agreed for them to use our washer and dryer since we could see that she was pregnant and would be needing an easy way to launder diapers like we required with baby Daegan. What could go wrong?

We began to find out when we occasionally heard what sounded like someone knocking on the ceiling downstairs. When we started to pay attention to it, we decided it was probably from someone using a broom to send us a message – a message about how we walked, or the music we played, or perhaps its amplitude. It was never too clear to us since we felt that we were going out of our way to keep quiet and they were not forthcoming about chit-chat whenever we met them.

They seemed to be particularly sensitive to noise – especially running water. Our attempts to water the lawn and flowers, for example, would often have them complaining about the sound in their suite. One day we woke up to find our hose wrapped and tied in one of the backyard trees. They weren't very good at talking, but were imaginative about taking action.

I can't say that our responses were much better. One day I came home to find Fran sitting on the basement stairs with a hammer in her hand. Every so often I would hear some knocks from the other side of the wall and then watch as Fran would use our hammer to reply to the knocks from her side. We later found out they felt we would purposely flush our toilet whenever they were taking a shower.

Another crisis occurred when Fran proceeded to do our laundry. With a hamper full of dirty clothes and diapers, she tried to open the door into the vestibule where the washer was located—only to find that it was locked from the other side. It was a flimsy door and they had simply installed a hook-and-eye system, so Fran just kicked it open to get through. We figured that they would get the message that the vestibule was “public” space, especially since the washer and dryer were ours. Besides—they had another lockable door into their suite.

Apparently, this was not to be. The next time that Fran took our laundry to get washed, the door was unlocked, but she was greeted by a dishpan shower of water. The woman had been doing her dishes at the time (we presume) and objected strongly to Fran's entrance.

Their refusal to discuss these issues did nothing to resolve them. We were not very forthcoming ourselves, so our relationship deteriorated into avoidance.

We were therefore surprised when they initiated a conversation with us just before the woman was due to give birth. They asked us to represent them as a married couple to anyone who might ask and to change the name on their mail box. They said it was to maintain the story they told the woman's parents. We changed the mailbox, but never met the parents fortunately.

A few weeks later we saw no signs of the couple, and when they returned, she was no longer pregnant—but there was no baby with them. When we asked, they said that the baby had died. Shortly after that, they moved out of the suite.

We didn't know much about their eventual circumstances, but a few months later, Fran met the woman at a UBC student party and had an opportunity to chat with her. She said they were no longer together—and went on about how nasty her partner had been.

Our hypothesis is that the whole set of events was their way of handling a pregnancy. As part of that hypothesis, we assumed that the baby had not died, but had been given up for adoption. We did not have enough information to confirm it—nor was it a big issue for us.

This was during a period where single parenting was not socially acceptable and a source of shame. The United Church, for example, had established housing for unwed mothers to help them through the process. A couple of years after our neighbour incident I was asked to conduct research on the UC Unwed Mothers' home since they were considering whether to shut it down.

This experience helped to form my attitude and approach to the issue of living with neighbours. The contemporary and future proliferation of renting, condos, and shared spaces makes this an issue that is worthwhile addressing. It has led me to the following principles.

- It is always a good idea to establish a method of communication with close neighbours. The best way of doing this is during a time when the relationship is relaxed, casual, and friendly (i.e. don't wait for a crisis).
- It is always best to take the initiative since most neighbours won't do it. I find it awkward and intimidating at times, but the development of the skills to do so is very important for managing future relationships. Waiting for "the best time" is also not a good idea since it seldom occurs spontaneously when one needs it. It's best to simply knock on the door occasionally and provide the neighbour with an update.

Although this is a hard thing to do, I have found that it often results in some nice benefits. Most neighbours are quite reasonable and willing to accommodate special circumstances—and in addition, they are most often pleased that I have taken the initiative to speak with them. They are also more likely to help out when a crisis emerges.

Fran and I still do a little "dance" about who makes the contact with the neighbours, but it is much less complicated now and our anxiety about it is significantly reduced as a result of the many good encounters we have had in the process. I hope you experience this as well.

Love,