APARTMENT ZERO

THE PEOPLE UPSTAIRS

A short story by WAKS

thewaksproject.com

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I. There Is No Seventh Floor

The first argument began at 11:46 on a Tuesday night, precisely four days after Nina Caldwell moved into Apartment 604.

A woman was crying. A man spoke in the reasonable tone some men used to make an argument sound like a lecture, which meant the woman cried harder. Nina pulled the pillow over her head, considered knocking on the ceiling with a broom, and remembered that there was no seventh floor.

She had specifically requested the top. After sixteen years of marriage and nine months of negotiations conducted through lawyers who billed in six-minute intervals, she wanted three things: *silence, a view, and nobody walking above her head.* Mr. Greaves, the building manager, had promised her all three. He had also promised reliable hot water, but the building had been less dependable about that.

The voices grew clearer. “Nina shouldn't have said that,” the woman upstairs said.

“She always says things she doesn't mean,” the man replied.

Nina sat upright. The speakers had the weary familiarity of people who had rehearsed a disagreement so many times that disagreement had become their home. She had known that condition. She didn't miss it.

The floor above her creaked. Something heavy moved. A chair dragged across boards that could not exist.

Nina placed her hand against the cool ceiling. A woman's voice, close enough to feel rather than hear, said, “She's listening.”

Nina stepped away and called the front desk. A recorded greeting announced office hours ending at six. She left a message identifying herself as a resident with a noise complaint and nearly added that the offending neighbors were imaginary. She could not persuade herself to sound ridiculous aloud.

The next morning Greaves met her beside a faded brass directory. He had small hands and carefully combed hair. When Nina described the sounds, he

pointed toward the stairwell. The sixth floor was the last landing. Beyond it was a plaster wall painted the same cheerful cream as the corridor.

“Sound travels,” he said. “You'd be astonished what it can do in an old building.”

“Does it know people's names?”

He gave a little smile. “Sometimes we think we hear things that relate to us.”

Nina hadn't told him which name she had heard. She wondered whether he was merely being tactful or whether he already knew.

At the elevator, he called after her, “Please don't try to reach the roof.”

“I wasn't planning to.”

“Good,” he said, though the relief in his face was entirely disproportionate.

II. The Problem with Other People's Voices

Nina had built her adult life around an ability to arrange chaos into categories. As a medical practice administrator she could make eighteen physicians agree on a scheduling policy, an accomplishment that required more patience than most acts of diplomacy. She considered herself sensible. Sensible people did not believe in ghosts simply because their apartments had poor acoustics.

On Wednesday she bought a sound meter. She recorded the silence of her bedroom at eight, nine and ten. The noise began at exactly 11:46. The meter registered nothing unusual. The recording app played back a soft hum. The actual voices were loud enough to make her teeth ache.

“You know what she did,” the man said.

“Don't make me say it,” the woman answered.

Nina called her sister Lydia the following morning. They had been close when they were girls, and had become carefully polite after Lydia's accident. Their conversations now resembled the meetings of distant colleagues. Both knew the agenda and avoided the important business.

“Do you think guilt can make you hear things?” Nina asked.

Lydia laughed. “In this family? That's practically the primary language.”

“I'm serious.”

“Then talk to someone. There's nothing strange about needing help after a divorce.”

“I didn't say it was about Marcus.”

“You didn't have to.”

Nina almost told her about the ceiling. Instead she asked about her niece, listened to a complaint about insurance premiums, and ended the conversation feeling relieved and ashamed.

Three years earlier Lydia had called her six times during a storm. She had been frightened of driving home after leaving a late appointment. Nina saw the calls while sitting across from an attorney, drafting the first serious plan to leave her marriage. She silenced the telephone. It was not her job, she had thought, to rescue everyone from every ordinary inconvenience.

Lydia had been hit by a truck whose driver later admitted he could barely see the road. A lengthy recovery followed. Nina visited the hospital almost every day and said her phone battery had died. Lydia never challenged the story. That had been worse than anger. It had permitted Nina to preserve the lie without relief.

At 11:46 that night the woman upstairs said, “She could have answered.”

The man replied, “Answering might not have changed anything.”

“She could have answered,” the woman repeated.

Nina fled to the kitchen and filled a glass from the tap. The water tasted metallic. Above the sink, three soft knocks came through the ceiling.

She knocked back without thinking.

The answering knocks were so close that she dropped the glass.

The next day Nina drove past the house she and Marcus had shared. She had sold her interest in it during the divorce, yet it was still the place her mind supplied when someone asked where she lived. A child's bicycle rested against the front steps. The garden held roses where she had once planted rosemary, and the porch light had been replaced with a frosted globe. The new owners had improved it without requesting permission from her memories.

She parked on the opposite side of the street, ashamed of the impulse that had brought her there. For years she had described Marcus as the person who made honesty impossible. That description was convenient because it allowed her to leave out the lies she told for her own advantage. He had been unfaithful; he had also been lonely, and she had found ways to punish him with silence that she called restraint. None of it excused him. None of it absolved her.

Nina tried to remember the first year they lived there. They had painted the kitchen together, laughing at the streaks on their wrists. They had taken a trip to the mountains where the heat broke and rain washed the dust from the road. They had loved each other, in the imperfect and entirely ordinary manner of people who meant well and did not always know how to be good. The certainty that their marriage had been nothing but misery was another of her defenses, more elegant than accurate.

Her phone rang. The screen showed Marcus's name, and for one startled instant she wondered whether the building had reached into her life outside its walls. Then she remembered he was calling about a tax document they'd forgotten to divide. She answered, negotiated the practical matter, and nearly ended the call.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You sound strange.”

“I'm sitting outside our old house.”

He did not laugh. “Why?”

“I don't know.”

He let that stand. Nina realized how unusual it had become for either of them to allow an answer to remain incomplete.

“I heard you moved,” Marcus said. “I hope the new place is good for you.”

She considered thanking him and moving on. Instead she said, “We weren't miserable all the time.”

“No,” he said. “We weren't.”

There was a pause in which neither offered to begin again. She felt a tenderness that required no action. After they said goodbye, she drove home without looking back at the rosebushes.

That evening Nina tested the acoustics again. She placed a small speaker on the bathroom floor and walked from room to room, recording what sound came

through walls and ventilation grilles. The experiment told her nothing remarkable. At 11:46, when the imagined neighbors began talking, she switched on the recorder and listened through headphones. The woman's voice said, “She remembers the good parts now.”

The man replied, “That's not forgiveness.”

“It's a beginning.”

The recorder captured only white noise. But when Nina replayed the file through a different speaker, her own voice could be heard saying, “I wasn't listening.” She had not spoken. She erased the file, then recovered it, embarrassed to recognize that an administrator who had spent her life insisting on records was now afraid of evidence.

For the first time, the upstairs voices seemed interested not only in accusation but in the shape of her attention. Nina had wanted a verdict. The building offered nothing resembling one.

III. A Floor Plan

On Thursday she visited the municipal records office and requested the approved plans for her building. The clerk gave her a scanned set of diagrams with some pages blurred beyond usefulness. Six floors. Forty-eight apartments. The roof contained ventilation units and a small locked storage enclosure. No staircase continued beyond the sixth landing. There was no hollow space above her apartment substantial enough to hold a chair, let alone the household that quarreled there.

She telephoned a structural engineer she knew through work. He examined a plan and warned her that old buildings could conceal all kinds of strange acoustic channels. She did not ask whether those channels could repeat a conversation word for word in advance of its occurring.

That evening a neighbor in 602 invited her inside for tea. Her name was Mrs. Adair, a retired music teacher who wore patterned scarves and spoke softly, perhaps because her ears had already heard enough loud things.

“Are you getting settled?” Adair asked.

“Mostly.”

“It's a nice building. People stay a long time.”

“Have you ever heard anything above you?”

Adair did not put down her cup, but her fingers tightened around it. “We live on the top floor.”

“I know. Have you heard anything?”

“Not since my husband died.”

“I'm sorry.”

“We had been fighting,” Adair said. “The night before. Not about anything that mattered at all. A pair of boots in the hall.”

She looked at the ceiling. “I used to hear him moving furniture up there. Not his ghost, exactly. The part of us that could never finish the argument.”

Nina waited for a smile that would indicate a joke. It didn't come.

“What stopped it?” she asked.

“I stopped asking the ceiling for forgiveness.”

When Nina rose to leave, Adair caught her wrist with surprising strength. “If a staircase appears, don't climb it because you think you can make yesterday different.”

Nina sat back down. “What staircase?”

Adair released her. “I think I ought to put the kettle on again.”

For three nights Nina tried to make the voices behave like a phenomenon she could study. She moved the bed, changed rooms, slept with earplugs, and left her radio playing quietly. The quarrel began at the same time regardless of what she did. Once she sat in the bathtub with the shower running and heard the couple discussing a decision she had made at nineteen, an incident she had never told Lydia or Marcus.

She had been offered a scholarship in a distant state. Her mother wanted her nearby, and Nina declined it. For years she described the choice as generosity. The woman upstairs called it fear. The man said that fear could be generous and generosity could be afraid; the distinction was not as clean as either speaker wanted.

Nina shut off the water. It struck her that the voices sometimes argued from positions she could recognize as her own. When she was ashamed, one accused and the other excused. When she was angry, they traded roles. She wondered whether the apartment was giving form to a divided mind, or whether the mind was making a room out of ordinary sound. Either possibility disturbed her, though only one threatened to rearrange the building.

She scheduled a medical appointment. The physician listened to her account without laughter and asked about sleep, stress, medications, and the injury to her shoulder. Nina answered carefully. The doctor recommended evaluation and urged her to seek help promptly if the voices became commanding or she

felt unsafe. Nina followed the advice. She wanted no supernatural explanation that excused her from ordinary care.

The building persisted. That night, after the appointment, she heard a chair roll across an invisible floor and a woman say, “At least she's trying.” The man replied, “Trying isn't the same as deciding.”

Nina whispered into the room, “What do you want?”

There was no immediate answer. Then the woman said, not to Nina but to the man, “She thinks everything has to want something from her.”

The observation stung. She had complained for years that others treated her as a person whose job was to meet their needs, but she had begun to see need even where no request existed. She turned on the bedside lamp and wrote the sentence in her journal. She did not know whether it came from a neighbor, a symptom, or a room that had never existed. It was worth considering anyway.

IV. The Staircase

At 11:46 on Friday night, Nina dragged a dining chair into the bedroom. A woman spoke above her, saying, “She doesn't know what she wants.” The man's reply was softer. “She wants it to stop.”

Nina climbed onto the chair and knocked three times. The voices ceased. After a long pause someone knocked back, three times, as precisely as an echo with intentions.

A key turned overhead. Something opened. Footsteps crossed the ceiling, reached the bedroom door, and began to descend.

The chair slid beneath her. Nina fell hard onto her right shoulder. The pain was immediate and convincing. She lay on the carpet while the steps continued, now coming from a corridor beyond her front door. She heard the elevator bell, then absolute silence.

In the bathroom mirror her face appeared older than it had yesterday. She washed blood from a cut on her elbow and told herself she was injured and frightened; these were facts. Everything else could wait.

In the morning she found a typed note under the door. It thanked her for requesting a transfer to Apartment 704 and stated that no such unit existed. It asked residents to refrain from entering restricted spaces. She carried the note to the management office, which was locked, its sign turned to TEMPORARILY CLOSED.

When she returned, the plate on her door read 704.

She tried her key. It wouldn't fit. She looked toward the elevator. The digital display showed a number seven before returning to six. When she turned back, a staircase stood at the end of the hallway, where there had been a plain wall the night before.

It looked entirely ordinary. Wooden banister, worn carpet, a square landing halfway up. At its foot hung a plaque engraved APARTMENT ZERO.

Nina took one step forward and stopped. Mrs. Adair's warning sounded in her head. The stairs felt less like an invitation than a test designed by someone who knew her weakness.

She went downstairs instead.

Greaves was in the lobby, turning the pages of a newspaper. His expression when he saw her was almost tender.

“Why did you change my door?” she demanded.

“I didn't.”

“Then who did?”

“I don't know what you've seen.”

“Have other people seen it?”

He folded the paper. “Sometimes a building keeps the argument after the people have left.”

“That's not an explanation.”

“No,” he said. “It's what I can tell you.”

On Saturday afternoon a package arrived with no sender. Inside were twelve photographs arranged in chronological order: *the apartment building under construction, the same building after its opening, an old management office, the sixth-floor corridor, and a picture of a woman standing in what appeared to be an upstairs hallway.* Nina recognized the woman in the last photograph as Mrs. Adair, decades younger, carrying a violin case. Behind her a door bore the number 704.

Nina took the photographs downstairs. Mr. Greaves was away, but the custodian, a teenager whose name badge read DARIUS, was cleaning a brass railing.

“Did you ever see a seventh floor in this building?” she asked.

He grinned. “People ask strange things here.”

“What do you tell them?”

“That Mr. Greaves says there isn't one.”

“Do you believe him?”

Darius considered the question with unexpected seriousness. “I believe he's telling the truth when he says there isn't one now.”

Nina showed him the photographs. He recognized the old lobby but not the woman. He pointed to a detail in the construction picture, a dark rectangle near the roof.

“That used to be a service stair,” he said. “My grandfather worked on the renovation. He said they closed something off because tenants kept going somewhere they shouldn't.”

“Where?”

“He wouldn't say.”

She returned to Mrs. Adair, who let her in only after Nina promised not to speak to the building manager about the pictures. The retired teacher arranged them on the dining table, then touched the image of herself with a fingertip.

“That's the winter Harold died,” she said.

“You told me you heard him upstairs.”

“Yes.”

“Were you ever in that apartment?”

“Once.”

“What did you find?”

Adair closed her eyes. “The life I had wished for when I was furious with him. He stood there and apologized for the boots, for the missed anniversaries, for every small thing I had used to keep us fighting. He said I could stay and have a husband who never disappointed me.”

“That sounds lovely.”

“It was terrible,” Adair said. “There is nothing lonelier than living with someone who exists only to agree with you.”

She poured tea into two cups and sat beside Nina. “Harold was kind and careless and stubborn. He loved music he played badly. He left dishes on the sofa. He forgot to buy medicine when he promised, and once drove three hundred miles because I'd mentioned wanting to see the sea. I missed the man himself. Upstairs there was only the man I had manufactured from my complaints.”

Nina looked toward the ceiling. “How did you leave?”

“I stopped demanding that the room correct the past.”

“Was he angry?”

“He was a room, dear. That's what I finally understood.”

Nina took the photographs home. She had wanted proof of a structural anomaly. Instead she had discovered a second witness to the possibility that a building could furnish the wrong answer to a very human longing.

V. The Call

Nina made the call from the bench outside the building. Lydia answered on the fifth ring, sounding distracted. Nina heard a child laughing in another room and the chime of a kitchen timer.

“I lied to you,” Nina said.

Lydia was quiet. “About what?”

“The day of your accident. My phone wasn't dead.”

“I know.”

“I was angry with Marcus. I was trying to leave him. I saw your calls and thought I couldn't deal with one more person needing something from me. I didn't answer.”

The silence that followed wasn't supernatural. It was the space two people make when an ordinary truth becomes impossible to postpone.

“I knew,” Lydia repeated. “You always thought I believed you because I didn't confront you.”

“I should have told you.”

“Yes.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“I believe you.”

“Can you forgive me?”

Lydia sighed. “I love you. But I'm tired of being asked to make you feel better about a choice I had to recover from.”

Nina put her hand over her eyes. She had rehearsed confession as a way to close a door. Lydia was telling her that the door belonged to both of them.

“You don't have to forgive me,” Nina said.

“Thank you,” Lydia replied. “That's the first useful thing you've said about it.”

They spoke a little longer, awkwardly but without the old performance. Lydia described how driving still frightened her in heavy rain. Nina listened without proposing solutions. They agreed to talk again the following week.

Back inside the building, the seventh floor no longer appeared on the elevator display. Her key opened 604 without resistance. The staircase at the end of the corridor was gone.

She cooked dinner and called a therapist whose number Lydia had once recommended. The voice mailbox accepted her name and promised a response. That night the ceiling remained silent. Nina slept until dawn and woke startled by the unremarkable pleasure of morning light.

She thought she had escaped.

Before Nina climbed, she visited Mrs. Adair a final time. The older woman was putting photographs into a small album with tissue paper between them. Her husband appeared in one, smiling beside a piano whose top was crowded with unopened mail.

“Do you ever wish you hadn't gone upstairs?” Nina asked.

“I wish I'd had someone to talk to before I needed that room,” Adair answered. “But I also wish Harold had lived long enough for us to grow tired of the argument for ourselves.”

Nina looked at the photograph. Harold seemed neither saintly nor cruel. He was a man with hair falling over one eyebrow and a crooked collar, standing in a room full of ordinary clutter. She was surprised to discover how much comfort she took from his imperfection.

“Do you believe the building is alive?” Nina asked.

Adair shrugged. “I don't know what the word alive means for a place. I know that people bring themselves into rooms. Some rooms seem to remember more than their walls should.”

“Do you think I should go?”

“I think you should decide what you hope to find. If you go expecting a new past, you'll be disappointed. If you go expecting an answer, you may find one you don't like. And if you don't go at all, that may be the wisest thing you've done.”

Nina left with more questions than she'd brought. She disliked that, but had begun to recognize a familiar trap: *she wanted someone else to assume responsibility for the decisions she feared making.* The staircase was not a courtroom, Mrs. Adair was not a judge, and Lydia was not a witness required to support Nina's preferred account of herself.

When the hour came she stood at the foot of the stairs and waited. She could turn away. She could move out. She could also climb without demanding that the past change to reward her. For the first time the choice felt like hers. She stepped onto the first stair, rested her hand against the rail, and continued upward.

VI. The House Upstairs

On Sunday, she discovered the note again. It lay in the center of her kitchen table although she had thrown it away. Its final sentence had changed: *Your request has been approved.* Occupancy is mandatory.

When she looked down the hall, the staircase was back.

She took her phone, her keys, and the photograph of Lydia and her as girls that she kept on the bookshelf. None of these objects seemed likely to help, but people have always carried small assurances into the unknown. Then she climbed.

The stairs smelled of furniture polish, rain, and the lemon soap her mother used. At the top was a door painted the green of her childhood bedroom. Nina opened it and stepped into the kitchen of her former marital home.

Marcus sat at the table. He wore the blue sweater he had worn on the day she first told him she wanted a divorce. Lydia stood by the window, untouched by the accident. Nina's phone lay on the counter, vibrating.

“Answer it,” Lydia said.

Nina picked up the phone. She recognized the number and the exact terror of an opportunity returned.

“Hello?” she said.

No one spoke. Then her own voice answered from the other end. “Don't do it. If you answer, you have to live with everything that comes afterward.”

Nina closed her eyes. She understood the bargain offered by this room. It was not a chance to save Lydia. It was a chance to imagine the version of herself who had never failed anyone, who had never hurt or been hurt, whose good choices would purchase immunity from regret.

“I'm sorry I didn't answer before,” she said into the telephone. “I can't change that.”

The room trembled.

Marcus stood and approached. “You can stay here,” he offered. “We can begin again.”

“We were unhappy,” Nina said. “Even when we tried not to be.”

He looked wounded. She allowed the truth to remain.

The window showed the same storm on an endless loop. Rain struck the glass and rolled upward. Lydia's image began to fade, then returned with her face older, as it was now, a scar visible near her temple.

“Come home,” Lydia said. It was not a command. It was not absolution. It was simply an invitation to the world where people continued living after they disappointed one another.

Nina set the phone down. The kitchen became a hallway. The hallway became the stairwell. She descended until she reached her own door.

The plaque read 604.

She opened it and stepped inside.

When Nina reached the kitchen inside the impossible apartment, she noticed an unsettling perfection. Every cup stood exactly where it should. Every photograph showed a happy expression. The window glass was spotless. Even the air smelled as it had on the mornings she used to wake early and feel briefly certain that she and Marcus could fix everything.

She opened a cabinet and found her wedding china, unchipped. On a shelf was the little red mug Lydia had broken when they were girls. She touched the repaired handle and thought of how often she had wished for a time when no one had broken anything that mattered.

Marcus offered to make coffee. He remembered the exact amount of sugar she liked before she stopped taking sugar. He told her she looked beautiful. Nina had spent years wishing he would speak more gently to her. But his gentleness was endless, and that made it oppressive. No one could answer her with anger, challenge or exhaustion. She could ask him anything and receive the most flattering version of herself reflected back.

“You have to be real,” Nina told him.

“I am whatever you need.”

She shook her head. “That's the problem.”

In the living room Lydia sat in the old armchair, reading the book she had been carrying on the day of her accident. The page never turned. Nina asked her what happened after the telephone rang, and Lydia gave a calm, reassuring account in which nothing was broken and no one suffered. It was the story Nina had once prayed to hear. Now it frightened her because she knew the real Lydia's pain had not made her a lesser person. To erase the injury in this room meant erasing years of endurance, anger, adaptation and the honest boundaries she had fought to establish.

“Do you forgive me?” Nina asked.

“Of course,” the impossible Lydia answered immediately.

Nina began to cry. “You don't.”

“I forgive you completely,” the woman repeated.

“That's not yours to say.”

The lights flickered. The woman's face changed, not into a monster but into a blank expression that seemed unable to understand why its generosity had been refused.

Somewhere above them a child began knocking on the ceiling. The three soft sounds moved across the house, room by room. Nina realized that this place might be upstairs to another apartment, another person revisiting a private failure, another life that had been flattened into a lesson. There could be rooms above rooms without end, each occupied by the consolation someone most wanted to mistake for truth.

She picked up the ringing telephone and allowed the voice to finish warning her. Then she said she would rather live with Lydia's anger than accept the love of someone who had never been hurt. The kitchen went dark, and the ordinary world returned with its ordinary unfinished questions.

There were nights after the move when Nina still woke at 11:46. A person can learn a time the way a body learns a scar, attending to it before thought arrives.

She listened to the ceiling of the new apartment, heard the upstairs neighbor crossing a floor that was entirely real, and found that she sometimes missed the certainty of being accused. Ordinary life did not announce which regrets were finished. It offered no official hearing at which the case against her could be dismissed.

Lydia visited one Sunday and brought a small lemon cake. They ate it by the window and talked about weather, work, and the state of their mother's garden. Eventually Lydia asked whether Nina had called the therapist again. Nina said she had. It was a little embarrassing to describe the pleasure of being listened to by someone who neither excused nor condemned her.

Lydia nodded. “That's something.”

“Would you come back next week?” Nina asked.

“If my schedule allows.”

Nina smiled. “That's a real answer.”

“It's the only kind I have.”

They embraced when Lydia left. It was awkward in the way that mattered, the pressure of two bodies that carried histories the embrace did not erase. Nina felt loved without feeling finished.

Later she took the packet of seeds from Mrs. Adair and planted them in a pot on the balcony. She had not studied the instructions closely. Some seeds might fail to grow. She watered them anyway. The sun moved across the railing, lighting the ordinary dirt, and somewhere upstairs the neighbor began practicing scales on a piano, badly and with great determination.

For one moment Nina laughed aloud. It sounded nothing like the woman who had cried through the ceiling. It sounded like herself, living in a building with as many floors as the plans promised.

VII. The Ledger

On Monday Nina met her new therapist for an introductory consultation. She did not mention the staircase. She talked about the divorce, the accident, her sister, and the exhausting habit of measuring whether she deserved to feel at peace. It was difficult enough to say those things without adding the extraordinary fact that the building appeared to agree with her harshest judgments.

She moved out two months later. She did not tell Greaves the reason. The building was pleasant during daylight, its windows full of soft autumn light, but she no longer wanted her private history made into architecture.

Mrs. Adair helped her carry a box. Before leaving, she pressed a little paper packet into Nina's hand. Inside were seeds for a climbing vine.

“Something that goes upward without asking permission,” Adair said.

They hugged. Nina wanted to ask what had happened to the music teacher upstairs, the man whose boots had started an argument that never ended. Instead she carried the seeds into her new apartment and placed them on a windowsill.

That evening, Mr. Greaves opened the ledger in the management office. Beside CALDWELL, NINA he entered: *Returned.* Exit incomplete. He considered crossing out the second phrase, then left it. Most people who returned continued to hear something, not because they were trapped but because memory did not become obedient simply because a lesson had been learned.

A new tenant had signed the lease for 604. He was a retired surgeon named Paul Denning, who arrived with a single suitcase and a framed photograph he carried face-down. Greaves reviewed the keys and the rubbish schedule. When the man asked about sound, Greaves told him the building was exceptionally quiet.

At 11:46 that night, Denning heard a child laughing overhead. The laugh was followed by an adult voice he hadn't heard in twenty years.

“Daddy,” it said. “Why didn't you come?”

He stood in the middle of his new bedroom, staring at the ceiling.

Downstairs, Greaves closed the ledger. He had stopped trying to count the floors of the building long ago. Some buildings had more rooms than anyone could bear to live in, and some rooms were made only when someone needed a place to hide a question.

In another neighborhood Nina watered the small pot of seeds and listened to the ordinary footsteps of an actual upstairs neighbor. She smiled at the sound. The neighbor dropped something heavy, apologized through the floor, and continued living.

Nina returned to her book. When Lydia called, she answered before the second ring.

REFLECTION

Does acknowledging a past mistake change its consequences, or merely our relationship to them?

... from the Eclecto-Pragmatism of Cedric Jones