

MOVING THE MEZUZAH

I took my introductory walk downtown from my new house, and the first person I encountered (in front of the fire station) was Michael, the antique dealer. “Are you walking from your new-house-by-the-library?” he asked. “I read your article.”

“I guess I have no secrets.”

Then I walked into Boyt Drugs to buy some cannabis gummy-bears for Lynn’s various aches and pains, and the woman behind the counter, in her yellow sundress, stopped me to say: “I love your articles in the paper.” I was both delighted and puzzled: How did she even know who I was? I didn’t think the hazy photo looked much like me, but maybe I was wrong. In the health food store, the owner Mark said: “How are things in your new house?” My sense of gratitude to be living in a small town felt overwhelming.

Lynn and I have been occupying our new house for all of two weeks. Everyone tells us this house was the showcase for the neighborhood, so we’ve created an imaginary television show based on our adventures: *From Showcase to Sh*thouse*. Every day brings a new installment. Episode one: “Are You Already Piling All Your Stuff on the Dining Room Table?” Episode two: “Poison Ivy or Sumac?” Episode three: “Hornets’ Nest in the Birdhouse.” Episode Four: “Bubble Bath in the Jacuzzi: A Rising Disaster.”

When the movers had packed all the big stuff from my old house on Woodbridge Avenue — and comically photographed themselves wearing my various hats: skimmer, deerstalker, fez — the last thing I did was to pry out the nails from the mezuzah on the front door-frame. A tiny paper scroll fell out. I don’t really think much about mezuzahs (this one had been a gift from my brother 30 years ago), but we’ve been watching the Hassidic soap opera *Shtisel* on Netflix — and every time a character in the show enters a new room he touches the mezuzah, then kisses his fingers. It’s an automatic gesture, like fastening a seatbelt, but it makes me think of the pervasiveness of spirits: they surround us. Lynn felt the presence of a spirit the other day when a deer followed her (five feet away, twitching its tail) all the way down Linden Avenue, in broad daylight. She was sure it was a visitation from her recently deceased mother.

Up on the second floor of this house, in the room which seems to be my office, I tried peeling off the college decal (Sacred Heart University) from the window, but after removing Heart University, I left the red letters of Sacred intact. It seemed a good word to leave on a window that overlooked the bright green world with its gardeners, dog-walkers, churchgoers. It serves to remind me not to overlook the majesty of the ordinary. However, I’m still struggling to peel off St. Joseph Falcons.

We walk Nellie tonight by the church of St. Francis of Assisi. At a house nearby, we see two nuns in habits sweeping leaves off their porch. On the front lawn of the house stands a statue of St. Francis holding a pigeon in his hands. The pigeon’s face is away from us, and seems to be contemplating St. Francis’s face. Meanwhile, St. Francis stares at the

roof across the street, as if contemplating whether the old stone chimney needs a squirrel protector.

Nellie, Lynn, and I return home. The sun is setting, and the air is suddenly filled with the astonishing sound of bagpipes, pouring through the kitchen windows. I cannot see him, but my next-door neighbor is creating this otherworldly music. The doorbell rings. Other neighbors across the street have called to introduce themselves. “You’re the first people we’ve actually spoken to,” we say. They offer warm words and a lavender plant. Lynn has already planted it in the back garden, and it’s thriving. The bagpipe music continues to surprise us at odd hours. An iridescent green hummingbird visited us yesterday, hovering like an emerald. *Sacred.*