

THE KRUPNICK COUNTDOWN

When I was in college I used to work Fridays and Saturdays at *The Star-Ledger* which, in the mid- 1970s, was edited and printed in downtown Newark. I proofread the Saturday and Sunday editions. Those were the days when a newspaper city room was filled with industrial-sized manual typewriters; the ceiling was hung with ancient pneumatic tubes used to ship the page proofs to the printing department. The editors were world-weary types who held a daily contest to see who could finish the *Times* crossword first. I had found this job through my childhood friend Michael Krupnick, whose father, Jerry, was entertainment editor of the Sunday paper. All winter long Jerry would announce something like: “Well, we made it through week three of the Krupnick Countdown!” He’d start counting down in December — there were approximately 12 weeks to his countdown — and then we’d have survived winter.

Now that it’s early March, I suppose we’re finally marking the end of the Krupnick Countdown. At this time of year I always remember an interview I once read with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. in which he said there aren’t four seasons, there are two: *locking and unlocking*. Welcome to unlocking, the overture to change. Lynn picks up sticks on the lawn; I study the emerging sprouts of bulbs that have been deceived by the endless rain and the occasional 60-degree weather. I haven’t lived here long enough to even know what they are.

My old house, on the corner of Woodbridge Avenue and Peltier, was knocked down in three hours this winter. After the first few swipes by a bulldozer’s arm, I drove by and saw, on the second floor, a cross section of my bedroom suddenly exposed to the sunlight. Neighbors texted me cell-phone photos of the demolition. This was even more unnerving when, two hours later, the house was entirely gone, not just the view from the sunny kitchen window but the antique kitchen itself. Not a scrap remained except for the front sidewalk where I’d scratched my dog Nellie’s name into the cement.

The dogwood Lynn used to photograph had been split in two; the asters, the Solomon’s seal, and lemon verbena that once flourished in our weedy garden had been reduced to dirt and broken cement.

Then, in less than a month, a new tall-timbered house was planted and framed. Yesterday it was sided with gray aluminum. There's a doorway (with a lock!) that will eventually lead to someone else's life. I restrain myself from stopping and asking the workmen questions.

And (*more change*) I see today that the Brass Lantern store downtown has two large *Retirement Sale* signs in the windows. Soon the store will be emptied. I'll miss the jumble of merchandise crammed into every corner: novelty chocolates, pancake mix, clocks, ornaments, retro-color paint, yarn, saltshakers shaped like robins.

Suddenly the last days of winter rise up again as if to remind us they aren't quite finished. The problem with the Krupnick Countdown is that it perceives winter as something simply to be *endured*, passed through as quickly as possible, one more symptom of this terrible habit we have of perpetually *waiting*. But there's a beauty to the white-boned birch in my new front yard, a beauty to this *exact-second*: the ice on the holly, the bright cardinal and his dusky wife against the ghost of snow; the chickadee inside the birdhouse, the other standing guard on its roof.

I walk with Nellie and breathe in the cold air, trying to imbibe its immediacy instead of always looking behind, always looking forward. For just a little longer, it's still winter.