

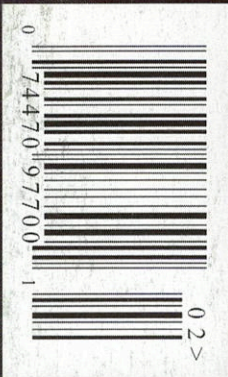
CHURN

An Art Magazine

Interview with
Cheryl Yambrach Rose

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Tom Bentley

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On Vacation with Irene

by *Tom Bentley*

About the author

Tom Bentley has worked as an actor, director and writer in the theater throughout Canada and England. He recently resigned as Artistic Director of Twenty-fifth Street Theater in Western Canada, in order to dedicate himself to writing full time. During his tenure, the *Glob and Mail* credited him for reviving the theatre and engineering the most dramatic come-back in Canadian theatre history. Tom is associated with developing and producing work by new Canadian playwrights and is the founder of the Saskatoon International Fringe Theater Festival.

Tom Bentley's short stories have recently appeared in Canadian literary magazines and have been broadcast on CBC Radio. He is presently working on two commissions to write for the theater. It is his hope that he can pursue his main interest as a short story writer and continue to live in San Francisco.

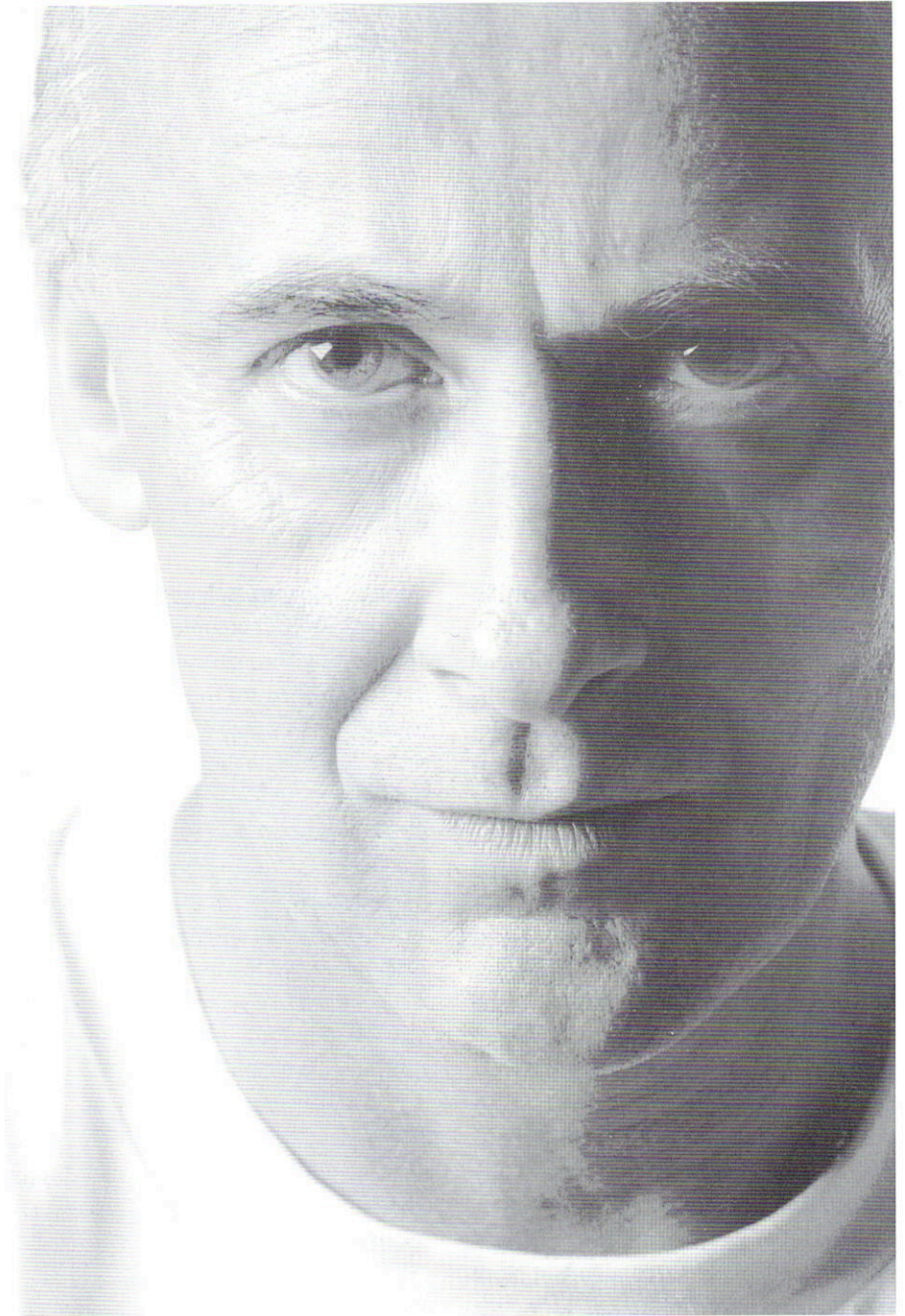


Photo by Stuart Kasdorf

Irene had been standing on the same spot of grass for over an hour the vacuum cleaner humming as she quietly sang as quietly as was possible to sing gospel music. Usually she stood on the carpet in her living room the vacuum blaring at full speed and sang to the top of her lungs. But this morning she knew it wasn't appropriate. And she didn't want to wake her girls with the news. So she took the extension cord that Jordan usually used for his ghetto blaster and dragged her Electrolux outside to the middle of the complex. She kept the cleaner on low speed she didn't use the power bar. She figured it was a good compromise. And Irene was used to making compromises. Marilyn Harris already called the supervisor. Irene had flipped this time it was six in the morning for heaven's sake. And there she was standing with that darn Electrolux standing in her housecoat out on the lawn in the middle of the complex vacuuming. The supervisor asked if she was causing a disturbance. Marilyn said not yet but it was only a matter of time. He told her to keep an eye on things he was going back to sleep but he'd check it out at nine when he came on duty.

At least she wasn't howling over the power bar as usual nobody else seemed to have woken up. But still this was truly weird even for Irene. Marilyn wished she hadn't given her the Electrolux in the first place. It was still pretty dark, but she could tell by the first rays of sunlight that Irene wasn't moving. She just held on tightly to the attachment and vacuumed the lawn.

Marilyn felt sorry for the people who'd be getting up to go to work. They had to cross the complex to get to the subway. Good thing most people in this slum are unemployed, she thought. But what about the seniors across the way? They'll open their curtains and there she'll be. What a way to start your day in your golden years and all! And who knows when the lunatic will flip outright. Go nuts with the power bar whip into the old folks home and start to vacuum the poor darlings up.

Marilyn stayed safely up on her balcony. She decided to monitor the situation from a distance and pray to God the silly cow kept the setting at low. It was one of the things she particularly liked about the vacuum. There was a low setting, a medium and a high. All before you even got to the power bar. And the power bar was magnificent. No she should have kept the darn thing in the first place.

She didn't leave the balcony even to put coffee on. Didn't want to miss a thing just in case. In case of what she wasn't sure. But in case. Besides there was something kind of pretty watching the first rays of the sun start to come up over the city. She hoped it wouldn't be as muggy as it had been during the past week. It was so stifling carrying all those Meals on Wheels in and out of the old folks home.

Irene woke up in the middle of the night. Jordan was gone.

Usually it was her favorite time of day. She loved waking up so she could check on her children. They looked so happy when they were asleep. She'd sit by their beds and thank God for all their blessings. They had clean clothes. Good schools. A community. And most important they had a lovely home. It took three years on a waiting list before they got it. But finally their boat came in. They were accepted into a beautiful low-income housing complex in the heart of Toronto or in their case a no-income complex Irene would joke with her neighbors.

On one side of a communal courtyard was a series of red brick apartment buildings for families mainly single parent families and on the other side a seven story high rise for senior citizens subsidized by government funding. For those of us who can't afford the deluxe departure to the Pearly Gates, Crystal Fleuty told Irene whenever she came up with her meal on a wheel.

Crystal was the eldest in the building. She was ninety-seven and lived on the seventh floor.

At the far end was a church. Had been there for years. Waiting for a complex to

come and get built around it, Irene thought. Various congregations were allowed to rent it out. Primarily Christians. And there was always some activity taking place in its main hall. Fitness programs, choirs, girl guides, bingo, and even Sumo Wrestling. Amateur of course.

The courtyard had a bit of grass and a children's playground. The swings were broken and the pavement a little worse for wear, but Irene considered the whole complex just a breath away from the Garden of Eden.

Irene loved her two bedroom unit on the ground floor with sliding doors onto the courtyard. It was God's prize, she used to say. A reward for living in Halifax without a toilet for so many years.

The complex was inspired by some missionaries who got fed up with third world countries. They decided to try their hands at urban development. It was managed by volunteers, who were responsible for fund-raising and acquiring the appropriate levels of government assistance. All to help the less fortunate in their own backyard, they'd say. If we're the less fortunate Irene would respond, God's doing something right in Toronto!

It was Irene's hope she could live in her ground floor unit until the day she'd have to pack her bags and walk across the courtyard to the other side.

After gazing into the sleeping faces of her children, Irene would slip back to her couch for a bit more shut-eye.

But this morning Jordan was gone. There was nothing in his bedroom but the extension cord.

Marilyn Harris jerked forward in her chair on the balcony. Irene had turned up the speed. There was a distinct difference in the sound. Not the power bar but medium at least. She wondered if she should call the Chairman of the Board.

Irene's three girls Melody, Elaine and Kimberly were all within four years of age. They were well behaved and responsible. Not quite teenagers, thank

goodness. And Jordan was basically a good boy. He'd be the first in Irene's family to graduate from high school.

Irene would go to any length to see that her family stayed together. She'd tried to bring up her younger sisters in Halifax. Promised them they would stay together forever. But they were taken away when the police dug up the backyard. Taken into foster care.

This family would be different, she vowed. They were together through thick or thin. Even if she had to excuse that hubby of hers for sleeping over down the street.

Melody, Elaine and Kimberly helped their mother with the meals on wheels when they came home from school at lunch. Part of the understanding about living in the complex was that if you were totally subsidized you helped out with the seniors. It wasn't a rule. Just an understanding.

Every morning, Irene's three girls tied ribbons in their hair. Irene loved ribbons. She suspected they took them out when they walked around the corner on their way to school. But she still appreciated the effort. They looked so terrific walking to the corner.

If their mother had a particularly difficult day, the girls would wait until she was all tucked up on her couch. Then they'd sing. GOODNIGHT IREEENE
GOODNIGHT IRENE GOODNIGHT
IRENE GOODNIGHT IRENE
WE'LL SEE YOU IN OUR DREAMS.
The girls were Irene's pride and joy. But Jordan was her hope.

Marilyn Harris looked across the courtyard and up to the seventh floor of the old folks home. She could see that senile Crystal Fleuty drawing her curtains. Then she watched her trying to open her window. But it wouldn't budge. Too high up. All the windows were locked from the second floor up. Management was probably afraid some poor dear might fall out. Or worse.

Agnes Kennedy, from the third floor, was lying on her bed fully clothed. She

was waiting for her son to drive her to the hospital. She thought she could hear a buzzing below her window. Mosquitoes, she decided. Good let 'em bite the lot of them. I don't care. Tomorrow I'll be dead.

Irene believed in the power of goodness. She tried hard to set a good example and not harbor bad thoughts about people. If a neighbor was unpleasant, she'd go out of her way to do a kindness. Before the housing committee said it was against the rules, Irene grew lettuce in a corner of the courtyard and took little green bunches tied up in ribbons to those she figured had been trespassing against us. Even to that Marilyn woman who gave her the vacuum. First of all so neighborly and then such a stinker. And such an attractive name Marilyn. Who would have thought?

Irene also knew about the power of badness. God had taken her a great distance in the escape but still life wasn't easy. She had to work very hard. Money was a constant worry. School lunches. Keeping the family going toward the Kingdom. Her hubby always up to some nonsense sometimes not home for weeks on end. And her health. The bones that had been broken and healed. The breathing. When it all got to be too much, Irene would take a vacation.

She'd learned the importance of taking holidays during the year she spent in a Halifax hospital, after they took her sisters away. When she couldn't stand the despair any longer, she'd leave. Let go. The vibrations inside her body took her away. After a while, she'd come out the other side, renewed and hopeful, ready for battle. Called it her physiotherapy session with the Lord.

The night before a vacation, Irene made sure everything was ready. Just before bedtime, she'd lay out the shawl her great-great grandmother brought from the United States of America. Irene was proud of her heritage. Her ancestors had traveled the underground railroad. Escaping by night on their secret route to freedom.

The next morning she'd call the hospital. Tell them her knees were giving out again. It was fib but she knew God would forgive her. The folks down at the hospital had some kind of arrangement with welfare and knew Irene's case pretty well. Her file was one of the largest. They'd send over a wheelchair.

Then she'd climb on board and wake her little sweethearts. She'd tell them she was taking a vacation and wasn't going to utter another word all day. And she didn't. The girls would make breakfast. And even if it was a school day, they'd stay home. Except Jordan he had to graduate.

Irene would put on her pair of oversized sunglasses, wrap herself up in her great-great grandmother's shawl, and have her daughters push her up and down the common courtyard in her wheelchair.

She loved being pushed in the courtyard. It was like riding between her past and her future. She reigned. She and the Big Fellah.

Not a word was spoken. Irene had released on the inside. She felt large in that place under her heart bone. She gave over to a kind of inner power. She was vacationing with God.

Marilyn Harris hated seeing Irene parading up and down like the novelty act in a freak show wearing those ridiculous glasses and the shawl she told everyone about as if she wanted to remind the entire neighborhood they were sharing a low-income housing complex with a former nigger slave. An inverted sort of arrogance, that's what Marilyn thought. So she got herself on the agenda and had a word with the housing committee.

The committee was sympathetic. There were already enough holes in the courtyard and it was thought the constant motion of a wheelchair would aggravate the cement even further. The behavior was disallowed.

The vacuum hummed away. Irene sang. The sun rose a little higher.

Up on the Seventh floor, Crystal Fleuty moved her tiny face as close as she could

to the window pane. She pushed her upper lip out and over her bottom lip and held onto her pretty button nose. She breathed into the lace which decorated the top of her nightie. She didn't want her breath to cloud up the window. She loved how the early morning sun was peeping from behind the hazy dark sky. Little sun rays bouncing off the metal of the vacuum cleaner and back up into the streaky air.

Crystal was grateful for her perfect eye sight. The smog was so lovely. Smog was always more beautiful in a heat wave, she thought. Comforting. She wondered how many in the building would die this morning. She knew that heat waves were notorious for killing off the old ones. Dehydration, loneliness, boredom ...

Not everyone was pleased with Marilyn for going to the committee. Many admired Irene and were tolerant of her harmless little eccentricities. There was no doubt she was a kind and caring mother after all. And work the woman never stopped. Her unit was spotless. And it was admirable how she kept her family together. Most single mothers with the kind of arrangement she had with her so-called hubby would have given up long ago. And her children were clean. With the exception of Jordan. But at least he wasn't part of the gang who spray-painted down in the laundry room. FOR A GOOD TIME FUCK SATIN AT APARTMENT 32. They were the cult kids from Block B. Devil worshipers or some such thing.

And Irene did a lot for the complex after all. If she saw any young men peeing in the sandbox by the playground equipment on their way home from the bars she'd shine a flashlight and scare them off. The next morning she'd rope off the offensive area in the sand and warn all the kids not to play there until management made arrangements. People conceded that her behavior might be a little odd but she certainly didn't do anyone harm.

A group of women went to the housing committee to have the decision regarding the wheelchair reversed but by then Irene's hubby had found out and said it made him look like a fool. So Irene decided not to take any more backyard vacations.

Irene was used to compromise. She'd take her vacations elsewhere.

The early rays of sun sparkled off the Electrolux like fire. Ripples of light ricocheted above the playground. The motor purred like the Mercedes Bens of the Vacuum.

People will be up soon, thought Marilyn, looking at the black woman with suspicion. Next thing you know she'll be pulling that pair of ridiculous sunglasses out of her dressing gown and mounting the Electolux. Probably thinks she can ride the thing like a wheelchair.

Marilyn was fond of the vacuum cleaner. She'd received it as a wedding present when she married. Her husband walked out the door years ago but that vacuum cleaner kept on performing. She'd given it to Irene in a moment of abandoned generosity. That was so often her downfall generous to a fault. It was a good thing her sister from Calgary had just passed on and left her all of her appliances.

Jordan was a good boy. Worked at night at a part-time job. Sometimes late but always in his bed when Irene checked on him in the wee hours of the morning.

His dad would wait for him out front in a big blue car. Such an expensive automobile. Irene saw it once in the daylight. Shaded windows and shiny hubcaps. She'd never been in it. Never been asked. But very sweet that his dad should pick him up and drive him to work every night.

Esther Williamson woke from a terrible dream. She was sweating something awful. She pulled off the sheet to check her feet. Yes they were big but not that big. In the dream, she'd gone off to her first day of school wearing tap shoes size twelve and a half mens!

Esther thought she could hear something coming from the direction of the senior's

apartments. Or from the courtyard. It sounded like Lisa Minelli. Or maybe Julie Andrews.

Last night the hubby spent an hour with Jordan in his room. Irene knew something was going on. Usually he waited outside. She tapped on Jordan's door twice. The first time she asked if they wanted cupcakes. The second time she told Jordan the time. Didn't want him to be late for his part-time job somewhere on the north end of the city she thought. But she knew something was going on. The motor kept running in the car out front. And there was someone waiting behind the shaded windows.

Early in the morning she checked his room. Even his posters were off the wall. Irene knew Jordan wasn't coming back.

Esther Williamson shook away her bad dream. She wanted to go onto her balcony to see what the humming and singing was about below, but could see Marilyn Harris from next door sitting on her balcony. The last thing she wanted to do was have any contact with that bitch it would ruin her day entirely. And today was her first day of tap lessons over in the church hall. So she stood on her table in the living room and tried to see over her balcony railing.

Agnes Kennedy on the third floor, laid in her bed and listened to the humming insects outside her window. She looked at her watch. Still no son. Good, she thought maybe I'll be dead before he arrives.

When Irene walked in and saw the empty room, she had very unkind thoughts about her hubby. She wanted to dirty up the entire apartment. Wake the girls and rip out their hair. Spray-paint the kitchen. She wanted to hurt somebody. She looked out Jordan's open window hoping to see the foam he slept on lying on the parking lot. Jordan all curled up his body plastered with hockey cards a circle of cupcakes surrounding his belongings. Anything. Anything to protect him from the power of badness.

She looked back into the empty room. She thought about her sisters and her dead mother. About the hospital. She wanted to wake up the girls and tell them to run. She wanted to know who had been waiting in the big blue car.

She closed her eyes. What to do, she thought. What to do. She could hear the voice of her father. She could see her sisters crying by the stove.

Irene went to the closet and took out the vacuum cleaner.

Since Irene could no longer tour the courtyard between birth and death, she had to make alternative arrangements whenever she felt the need for a vacation. When things got to be too much, she'd stand in the middle of her living room, hit the power bar on the Electrolux, and sing. She'd keep the vacuum on so as not to disturb anybody, particularly the non-Christian folk who got past the housing committee. Sometimes she had no idea what was coming out of her mouth—the sound reverberated so loudly she couldn't hear it anymore. She could only hear God. Often she'd stand on the same spot of carpet for over an hour. Vibrating and listening.

Irene truly appreciated that vacuum. She tried to give it back to that Marilyn Harris after she turned so mean, but she refused to take it. Three times she tried. And three times she refused. Must be that God wanted her to have it, she realized at last.

Several months earlier, Irene had joined a gospel choir. They rented the main hall in the church on Sunday nights after Sumo Wrestling and rocked on till nine. They could have sung till midnight but nine was bedtime in the old folks home. Over weeks of practice a voice started coming out of Irene's body that didn't sound like her voice. It caught everyone by surprise. Members of the choir were amazed at its power. Irene had to be careful it didn't drown out the others. You're filling the kingdom they'd say. Making it hard for the rest of us to keep up. Irene knew it was because her faith was on the upswing. Still, she was awed by the majesty that was developing in her

vocal cords. She knew it was a gift from God.

Irene didn't want to wake up her girls. She didn't want them to know Jordan was gone. So she took the extension cord and dragged the Electrolux out onto the lawn. She sang at low speed.

I could just slip down and pull the plug, Marilyn thought. But then what? I couldn't bear it if she started singing those slave songs again. Sings them for me—I know she does. Something genetic I think.

I don't know why Social Services just doesn't come and take those children away. I guess they're getting too old. And being black children and all might be hard to place. But they're polite. Even the boy. You know sometimes I look at them and I'm sure they're all different shades. I wonder if that hubby of hers is the father of the lot.

Hubby! How ridiculous. If I hear her talk once more about her hubby I think I'll say something. The man's got a real wife and kids down the road. Got a divorce years ago apparently. Hubby. Pathetic! The man's a known felon. Part of a gang. Takes his son with him every evening. Some nigger gang in a big blue Lincoln.

Marilyn could always hear her singing those gospel slave songs over the vacuum. She wasn't fooling anyone. Standing there rippling in pleasure. Receiving her Lord. The vibrations of the machine shaking away her sins. Sucking them down the long hard tube. The canister bags waiting ... waiting ... all snuggled up in the cool gloss body of her Electrolux. She's not fooling anyone. She's not cleaning—she's singing!

I'm just grateful those canister bags cost a minor fortune, that's all I can say.

The sound of traffic made Marilyn check her watch. Yes—the whole place was going to start waking up any minute. It was nearing six-thirty.

Then she heard it. The machine kicked into high gear. Still no power bar, but certainly more audible. And the voice was getting louder.

Curtains in the windows of the senior citizens complex across the way began to open. The balcony doors on the left side of Marilyn's bachelor unit slid apart. Marilyn watched Esther Williamson come out onto her balcony. She looked all flustered.

The two women couldn't think of anything to say to each other. They'd never gotten along. But this morning something special happened between them. An understanding. It was as if the shared embarrassment of seeing a black woman with her vacuum cleaner brought them closer together. In a way that only white women could understand.

Irene started to sing with the fullness of tone she'd been developing at choir practice. Not loud yet—just full. Had it been awful, someone probably would have pulled the plug. But it was really quite good. That—in combination with a sense of danger that was coming from the stillness of her body—kept people at a distance. Irene was electric.

Most got on with their preparations for the day—checking every once in a while to see if she'd moved. And looking at the morning sky. There was something unreal about the light. The kind of sky you see painted in a religious magazine. Too beautiful to be real. Glorious. As if there is a heaven after all, thought old Crystal Fleuty on the seventh floor.

Irene's three daughters stood on their patio not knowing how to handle the situation. Only once did their mother make contact. A swift glance as if to say—One step toward me and I'm going for the power bar!

Esther Williamson leaned across to Marilyn and said, I think she's singing show tunes.

Irene could hear her great-great grandmother singing in her escape. Follow the drinking gourd—Follow the drinking gourd. She could see the eyes of hatred peering through the dark.

I'm sure she's singing show tunes, Esther repeated.

No she's not, snarled Marilyn. She's singing one of those goddamn slave songs ...

Irene began to see her life flash in front of her eyes as if she were drowning.

It's from Cabaret or the Sound of Music, insisted Esther, barely able to hold back a tremendous impulse to weep. Images of Irene's past rushed toward her. Curtains and doors continued to open. The homeless gathered on the church steps for their early morning sandwiches.

The three girls stood outside their patio door and began to put ribbons in their hair.

Irene could see her father. He drove his car into the backyard.

Irene hit the power bar.

Oh my goodness we're in for it now! yelled Marilyn.

A magnificent voice sailed across the complex.

Crystal pressed her tiny ear against the window pane. She could hear the gliding singular voice of an angel. Holy holy holy Lord God Almighty Early in the morning We come to face the Lord.

Agnes Kennedy, still waiting for her son, began to hear more insects outside her window. They sounded so busy. Flying so fast her lips started to buzz. It made her want to get up immediately and pick crab apples off the little tree in the complex. She wanted to make jam for her grandchildren.

The president of the Sumo Wrestling Club had to know what was happening. He ran onto the courtyard and was overcome with the power of the strange woman's voice. It was full of such passion. She was singing the blues. Strong and twisting. Wringing deep into the pit of his belly. He gasped.

Irene could see her mother hiding in the cellar. She could smell the damp earth. Coal and potatoes. Her father opened the cellar door. Light poured down onto her mother's head.

Her mother prayed. Irene crawled into the corner of the dark. Her father groped into the blackness.

The strength of Irene's lungs filled the air like thick syrup. Faces lined the seven stories of the seniors building. Bodies crammed into the courtyard. Neighbors

stood beside neighbors they hadn't seen since the housing committee's annual general meeting.

Maureen McGill hobbled out of the old folks home on her walker. She remembered the tango and how it made her feel sexy.

Mr. and Mrs. Cranston walked out hand in hand. They stood in the crowd and smiled. She's playing our song, said Mr. Cranston. It's the Tennessee Waltz. Elizabeth Florendo started to bawl. She loved La Boheme.

Stop, cried Marilyn. Stop that noise. Irene bandaged her mother's wounds. She kissed her mother's forehead. She buried her mother in the backyard.

The sunrise was at its most splendid. The world seemed full of hope. Orange beams of light streamed onto the red brick buildings and shone rainbows across the old folks home.

RED SKY IN THE MORNING A SAILOR'S WARNING, someone hollered.

RED SKY A NIGHT A SAILOR'S DELIGHT, came a response from over by the church.

The little girls kept adding ribbons to their hair.

GOODNIGHT IREEENE ...

The blue car with its shiny hubcaps fled into the distance ...

GOODNIGHT IREEENE ...

She could see her dead father behind the shaded windows with her husband and her son. She could see her great-great grandmother waving at the three girls in all their ribbons signaling for them to come to her to hide behind the shawl in her struggle toward freedom.

Marilyn Harris started to hyperventilate. She wanted to look away Irene was vibrating so fast she was becoming blurry. She tried to move her head, but she couldn't remember how. She wanted to blink, but her eyelids wouldn't move. So she just stood there and hyperventilated.

Irene's voice rose above the complex the vibrato of her full tone soaring higher than any octaves known to man. She filled the sunrise. Light began to shine from her head.

She listened.

Let go, a voice said. Free your sisters ... your mother. Free your daughters..your son. Forgive. Forgive.

There was silence.

My God, said Esther Williamson. She's going up.

She's lifting off the ground, whispered Crystal Fleuty, as the glass fell from her window onto the courtyard below.

Up. Up. Like the finale in CATS! screamed Esther. Or THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA!

The enchanted spectators cheered at the splendor of the ascent. Fractured light glistened in the morning air a chandelier dazzling even the housing committee in their disbelief. Seven stories of glass shattered from their casements and fell in an avalanche toward the Electrolux below.

Irene could feel the pleasure of release.

The sunrise ended. A damp heat could already be felt throughout the complex. Sweat began to form in the creases of the forehead. Beads of wetness gathered in the little crevice above the upper lip.

Come back said Marilyn Harris, looking high above the seventh floor. Come back.