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The House

Fiction By Barbara F. Lefcowitz

THOUGH I AM MERELY a distant neighbor and have no interest in its purchase, I can't resist entering the house in South Freeport, the house of the woman who died last week. She left no friends or survivors.

The house has been scrubbed and sprayed, chairs arranged as if for an elegant soiree, fresh flowers, plates, and cups in just the right order.

Propped on the sideboard, blown-up photos of someone's kids at a beach; a woman, a man, a wedding cake; a sepia

face in a silver frame. Each photo set up as if it had stood there forever, along with the souvenir bowl from Yellowstone, the pastel mints that fill it halfway all wrapped in cellophane, the kind you have to peel back with your fingernails.

I want to hear the songs she sang to keep herself company, especially when the bulb dimmed in the lamp with the blue pleated shade.

In the closet of the room where the

woman died—always they open the closets—the woman's clothes are neatly hung, dresses she'd never worn brushing against a dry-cleaned bathrobe, the tag with "Special Rush" still pinned to its mauve collar. A few skirts have been lent by the real estate agent herself to give a semblance of color and balance. The terminal linens are, of course, gone, burnt for sanitation's sake well before the woman herself became ashes. Through a window near the closet the October sun and shadows create an illusion of sharp angles that please the real estate agent.

I want her voice to slide down a shaft of air along with the dust motes that dance in the sun, want it to slide like the sun itself slides down the long leaves of a palm tree.

Now here's the Master Bath, the agent says. It's the very pink of health, toothbrush and mate in their respective slots, bristles on both brushes slightly damp, lest someone catch on and offer the "desperate to sell" price, what banks expect when there's no survivors.

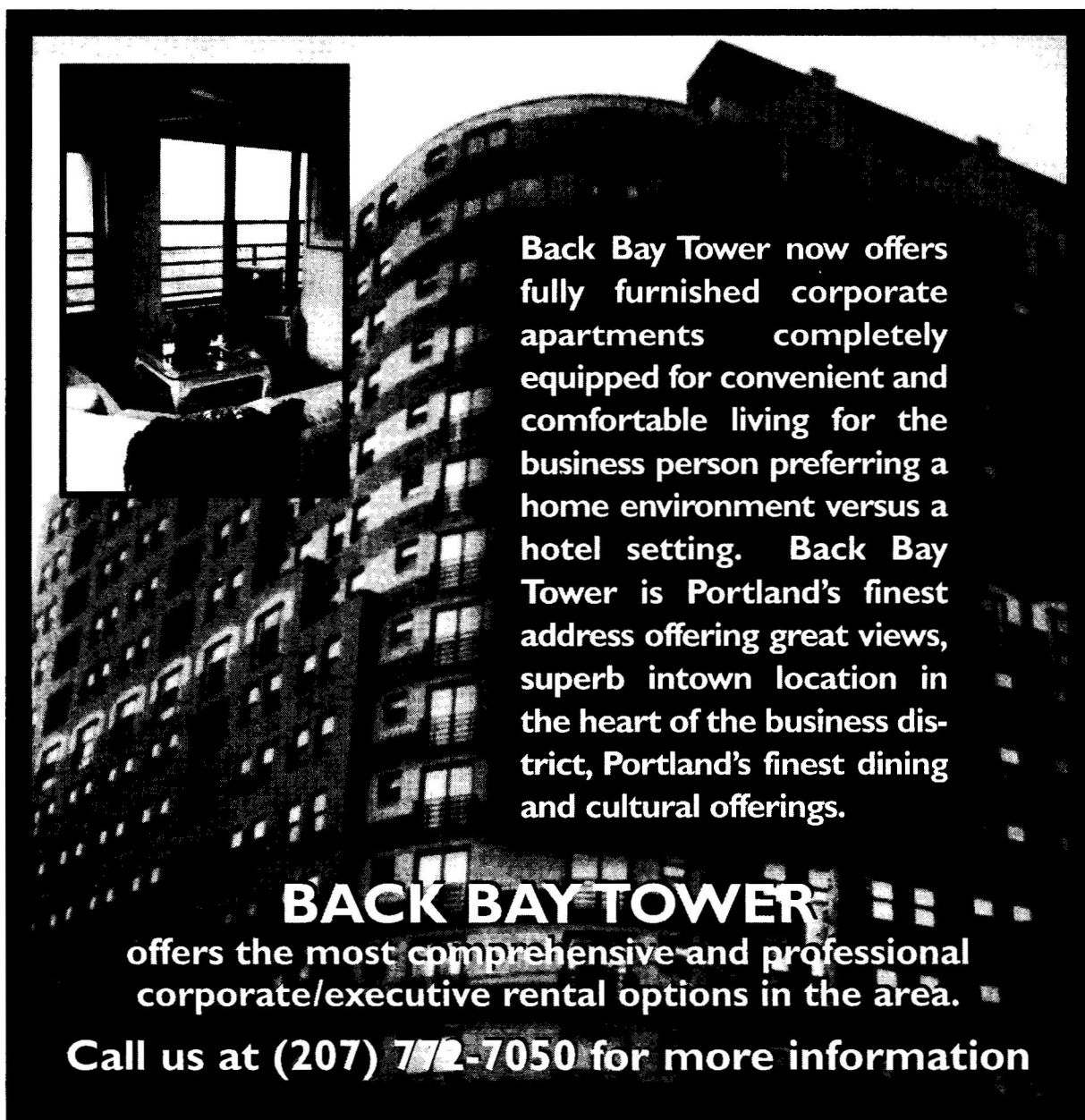
And this was her very favorite place, the agent says, leading a small group of people, mostly neighbors like myself, into a pine-panelled back room.

Its bar is stocked with what are supposed to be bottles of cordial and wine.

Just a few, but carefully chosen: some Triple Sec, Kahlua, a California chardonnay from Kenwood Estates, a Taylor's burgundy. A half-knit sweater, gray and blue wool, on a table near a slightly scarred leather chair; a stack of *Better Homes*. . .

I want to hear a story the knitting needles told her as she recorded it in hand-dyed wool, her fingers working furiously to keep pace with the narrative.

The agent briefly lets her smile fold itself into a frown, slides out of sight with her foot an empty bowl of the sort used to feed a cat or dog. Were there any other traces of animal life? A paw print, a urine stain on any of the rugs? A bit of cat litter unscooped by the vacuum? What if the dead woman was one of those loonies who kept bats or baby skunks as pets; she had read about such women in a magazine in her dentist's waiting room. But surely someone would have noticed; surely there would have been some evidence even though the woman had no friends or survivors.



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I want evidence. Want evidence she not only dreamt about wild beasts but fed them secretly, let them enter through a well-concealed trapdoor and lick her to sleep. Not just the expectable tigers and zebras, but gryphons and winged horses, at least one unicorn and maybe a couple of garudas, both of them born in her private zoo.



The woman's clothes are neatly hung, dresses she'd never worn brushing against a dry-cleaned bathrobe, the tag with "Special Rush" still pinned to its mauve collar.

What's the condition of the furnace? a man asks. Electric or gas?

Oil, the agent answers. Pure natural oil. She scratches the back of her stockinged calf, positive some outrageous insect is nibbling her blood. One of those dangerous insects like she saw on the *National Geographic* special last summer.

Is there a smoke detector? asks a woman. Of course.

I hope it's broken. Broken from having to sing its siren song about so many banked fires the woman finally figured out how to keep it silent so the fires she made could blaze. Blaze all night and all day, brighter and more intense by far than the afternoon sunshine outside.

