



NO
PLACE
LIKE
HOME

QUICKREADS

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Karen closed her eyes.

“When I open them,” she thought, “we’ll be home! I’ll be in my own kitchen with the pretty yellow curtains. The whole room will smell like freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.”

Tears trickled down her cheeks. Karen knew her wish wouldn’t come true, but she opened her eyes slowly anyway. *Just maybe*—but she wasn’t at home. She was still in the cheap hotel.

Karen, her husband George, and their son Andy now lived in one scruffy room. They were lucky to have a bathroom of their own. There were no curtains on the windows. The

room had a sour smell. All their food had to be cooked on a hotplate. And worst of all, she had no friends at all here.

But she had to remember the one good thing about this place! Ever since they'd moved here, four-year-old Andy hadn't been sick anymore.

Karen glanced around. She'd done everything she could to make the room look nice. She'd scrubbed the floor and the walls. But she hadn't been able to get rid of the stains and sour smells.

To brighten up the place, she'd tacked up Andy's crayon drawings. The trouble was, most of Andy's pictures were of their old home. And that made things even sadder for Karen.

Karen and George had gotten married five years ago. They'd found a low-rent, two-bedroom apartment in an old building. The young couple had gotten to know their neighbors—people who'd lived in the building for years. Everyone there looked out for each other. The kids played together. The families

had become good friends.

George had a good job working in construction, and Karen worked as a waitress. Both of them were satisfied with their home. But after Andy was born, they began to dream about buying a house. They dreamed of having a yard for Andy, a garden for Karen, and a workshop for George.

“Someday,” they said, “when we can afford it.” They started a savings account for the down payment.

Then Andy got sick. He’d never been a very healthy little boy. From the day they brought him home from the hospital, it seemed that Andy had one health problem after another.

The doctors couldn’t figure out why Andy got sick so often. They tested the paint in the apartment for lead. The test came back negative. Karen wanted them to test the carpet to see if Andy was allergic to the fibers. But tests cost money, and their health insurance wouldn’t pay for anymore tests.

Karen had to quit work so she could stay home to take care of Andy. With only one income, George and Karen found it very hard to save anything.

They started dipping into their savings account to help pay for Andy's medical bills. Before they realized it, the money they'd worked so hard to put away was almost gone.

Then, to make matters worse, the landlord sold the building. The new owner raised the rent immediately. George and Karen fell behind in their rent payments. There was no way they could afford to stay there. But finding an apartment they *could* afford seemed impossible. They realized how lucky they'd been. Everywhere they looked, the rents were sky high!

The landlord finally evicted them. Karen and George could hardly believe they were homeless! It was a nightmare. They had never imagined themselves living on the streets.

At first, they'd gone to a homeless shelter. Karen hated every minute of it. The noisy

shelter was terrible. Too many people were crowded together there. They had no privacy at all. Karen worried all the time that she and Andy would be hurt or robbed while George was at work.



Finally, George found this hotel. Here, they could rent a room by the week. Although they now had privacy, Karen still hated the place. It was in a high-crime neighborhood. The neighbors seemed cold and unfriendly. And Karen was homesick!

“In the old place, the tenants were like one big happy family,” Karen remembered. “It’s true what they say: There really is no place like home.”

Then Karen abruptly snapped out of her daydream. She glanced at her watch, and realized how late it was. George would be home soon. She didn’t want him to see her tears.

Then the door banged open. Andy ran into the room, pretending to be an airplane.

Karen grinned. It was wonderful to see her son so full of energy.

“Maybe I should start looking for work again,” she thought as she set the small table for dinner. “With two incomes, we’d be able to get out of this trap faster. If I was working, we could afford to pay more rent.”

Karen felt cheered by that prospect. Then she thought about one of her former neighbors, Theresa. Theresa and Karen had been good friends. Andy and Theresa’s son Billy had played together. “Theresa used to babysit. Maybe she could watch Andy while I was at work,” she thought to herself.

Karen’s depression lifted. She grabbed Andy the Airplane as he flew by and gave him a big hug! “How would you like to go see Auntie Theresa and Billy tomorrow?” Karen asked.

Just then, the door swung open again. George and his friend Buddy tramped into the room. Neither man looked happy. “Bad news,” George said.

“What’s wrong?” Karen asked, sinking

onto the bed. George dropped into the room's only chair. Buddy plopped down on the floor.

Andy crawled into his father's lap. After giving his son a hug, George looked sadly at Karen.

"It's about our old apartment building, Karen. The new owner is going to tear it down," George said. "He's going to build a fancy high-rise condominium on the very same site. And guess which construction company is going to be doing the work?"

Karen stared at George, trying to take it all in.

George nodded. "You got it! Buddy and I are going to be tearing down our old home!"



Karen felt as if she'd been dropped into a deep dark hole. All her hopeful plans for moving back to the old neighborhood suddenly vanished. "But—but what about our friends who live in that old building?" she gasped.

Buddy shook his head. "Everyone's moved

out already. Who could afford the higher rent? The building is empty.”

Karen gazed at him in stunned disbelief. “What happened to Theresa?”

“She and Billy have gone to stay with her mom until she finds a new place. You remember Theresa’s mom, don’t you? She lived around the corner.”

Karen nodded. “I—I was going to see Theresa tomorrow.” Karen turned to George. “Now that Andy’s well, I thought I might try to get my old job back. I was hoping that Theresa might be able to babysit for me.”

George smiled at his son. Then he looked at Karen and nodded. “Why not? We could sure use the extra money.”

“Theresa could, too,” Buddy said. “With her medical bills, she needs all the extra money she can get.”

Karen frowned. “That’s right. Theresa *did* get sick a lot, didn’t she? I wonder if she’s strong enough to take care of a rascal like Andy?”

Buddy grinned. “She’s doing a lot better

these days. Go see her, Karen. A visit from you would do her good.”



Later, as Karen washed their dishes in the bathroom sink, she thought about what Buddy had said. Theresa hadn't been the only tenant to get sick. A lot of other people in their old building had come down with one illness or another. “All of us used to joke that we must be allergic to paying rent,” she remembered. “But I wonder what the *real* cause was.”

The next day Karen and Andy rode the bus across town. Andy talked non-stop about the games he and Billy would play. Karen pretended to listen, but she was looking out the window and thinking about the old neighborhood.

“The whole street is going downhill. Once the building is torn down, I won't want to come back,” she thought sadly.

The bus turned the corner and Karen's heart beat faster. There it was! The empty