Room for a view

The will

When Mrs. Nash turned 86 her shoulder pain made it impossible for her to drive. Despite Ann's insistence, she refused to fly to Florida. She refused to write her will, even though the lawyer said waiting was a mistake. In December, after a second fall, she asked Dave, Ann's husband, to sell the Ford. She was angry about her arthritis. One day, when Ann dropped off groceries, she found her mother wrapped in Stewart's sweater, crying.

"It's absolutely freezing here, Mom. Did you fall again?"

"Everything's fine." Mrs. Nash sat in the kitchen.

"Can't you feel the cold?"

"No." Mrs. Nash stared at her veined hands.

"Have you been crying?"

"No." Mrs. Nash's eyes were red.

"Mom, you need a cordless with my number and 911. You just push a button."

"No." All her life she had said no. When she was young she had been against the easy way. Now she was old and wanted to be left alone. Ann hired a maid two days a week and a man to clear snow. Despite her pain, Mrs. Nash cleared the sidewalk.

"Mom," Ann said. "I pay the man to shovel snow."

"Black people don't know about clearing snow."

"You can't think like that," Ann said.

"I can think whatever I want," Mrs. Nash said. "I can say whatever I want."

The arguments began when Ann was a child. But now Ann was 59, with a husband, three daughters and two grandchildren. Eric had moved west; her younger sister, Katy, never called. Ann visited twice a week.

"It's hard to live alone ... the stairs,

the cleaning ... you might be better off —"

"I won't move," her mother said.

"I saw ants in the kitchen; they smell garbage."

"I hate bugs," Mrs. Nash said. "It's the maid who brings vermin."

"Mom! You can't care for yourself. What if you fall?" Ann spoke of a place six blocks away with 24/7 supervision. A nurse was on call; a doctor came each week.

"Have you sold the Ford? It's been a month already."

"It's been *three* months, Mom. It's March now. No one's replied. It's an old car."

"Keep the money. You and Dave take your holiday."

Mrs. Nash stared at her clasped hands on the kitchen table. Ann looked closer. There was a gash from her ring finger to her palm. "You're cut. Why didn't you call?" Ann took her mother's hand and saw the flesh and blood deep inside. "You need to get that sewn up. It looks infected."

"Tell me, Ann. Why did Stewart go?"

Colour drained from Ann's face. "Dad's been dead ten years."

"But where did he go, Ann? And where is Benny?" Mrs. Nash went on for a half hour, perplexed and tearful. Where was Stewart, her husband? Where were Eric and Katy?

Once they had all lived together in a red brick house on Cedar Street.

Benny, the dog, slept on the hall rug; when there was thunder he flew upstairs. The children had gone to public school, run in the playground and helped her plant roses in the garden. They had played on the swings in the back yard and made castles in the sandbox. Mrs.

Nash had photos on the sideboard in the living room, and an album, where Stewart had noted places and dates.

"Stewart said I was an ivory butterfly." She had been a beautiful, proud woman.

The house held her memories. She did not ever want to leave.

"Mom," Ann said. "This is Miss Azziz, the social worker I mentioned."

Miss Azziz was a slim pretty woman with dark glasses

"How are you today, Mrs. Nash?" Miss Azziz asked.

"Fine." Mrs. Nash's lips pursed and her eyes narrowed. "Did Dave sell the Ford?"

"No," Ann said.

"How are you managing?" Miss Azziz asked.

"I take my pills. I had another fall, that's all. You don't need to come."

"Do you remember my name?"

"Why should I?" Mrs. Nash said to Ann, "That lady is not from here, is she?"

Everything was changing. The original families had left Cedar Street and moved away. The faces of the street were the colours of the world. The words, the smells — everything was different. The local hospital was run by nurses from foreign countries.

A swarthy psychiatrist came to her house.

"I don't understand," Mrs. Nash said. "The only thing that stays white is snow."

"Mom," Ann flushed. "That has no place here. Please excuse my mother."

Dr. Nair asked questions. "Can you spell the word *world* backwards?"

"No," Mrs. Nash said. "The world is already backwards."

"Try," Dr. Nair smiled in his pleasant, persistent way. He asked her to repeat numbers and words, to add and subtract, to read and then to draw with a pencil.

"How am I doing?" Mrs. Nash asked.

By April Mrs. Nash had lost ten pounds. She was not strong enough to walk outside. She was too proud to use a cane or a walker. She leaned on Ann when they went out. Stairs were nearly impossible, but Mrs. Nash had a fearless determination. Despite failing strength and memory, she never gave up. Dave ordered caregivers through Miss Azziz. Few lasted more than a week; they got fed up with her racist complaints and talk of her dead husband or Benny.

One May evening, Mrs. Nash stood in her living room and called Ann on the new cordless phone.

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you," Her words were slow. She had a bad headache. "It's a

secret."

Dave came on the phone. "You have to tell us, or I won't let Ann come over."

"I just wrote my will," Mrs. Nash paused. It hurt to talk. "I want to show you —"

Ann took back the phone. "Mom, I'm not interested in your will. I'm not interested in your money. Katy and Eric aren't interested either."

"I'll give it all to Benny," Mrs. Nash found the words with sudden viciousness.

"You need to be taken care of. You're getting worse."

Mrs. Nash pressed the off-button on the cordless. She staggered toward the sideboard, to a picture of Stewart pushing Eric, Katy and Ann on the garden swing. Ann held Benny; he was a pup. Her mind tried to recall the garden

where she had been happy and free. Her head felt weak, funny. The phone slipped from her hand.

Something had happened. The garden was gone.

She saw the ceiling. It was dark. She lay on the carpet. Blood pooled on her face. Where was her will? She tried to move; there was too much pain in her legs. Nothing moved except her thought. The hands inched along the floor, groping for the cordless phone. Ann's number — what was it? She pressed redial.

"Ann? Ann? I've a bad fall. Something's broken. You will come, won't you?"

Ronald Ruskin

Psychiatrist
Toronto, Ont.

Lifeworks

Alive in art

Pegi Nicol MacLeod: a life in art

Curated by Laura Brandon
Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa
February 7 – April 17, 2005

Pegi Nicol MacLeod was among Canada's most prominent artists during the second quarter of the twentieth century. In her short lifetime she showed her paintings extensively across the country, alongside the likes of A.Y. Jackson and the rest of the Group of Seven. She won prestigious national art prizes and received important commissions, including one for war art from the National Gallery of Canada. She was a founder of, and a respected teacher at, a summer art school at the University of New Brunswick. Although these credentials are enough to warrant the current restoration of her work to the public arena, her achieve-

ments are even more exceptional because she gained respect as an artist in an almost exclusively male milieu. As one discovers when visiting Pegi Nicol MacLeod: A Life in Art, the potential for gender-based barriers to her acceptance in the art world was of no consequence to this free-spirited and determined young woman (called "Pegi" by all who knew and admired her), just as familial objections and constant financial struggles could not stop her from pursuing her vocation. Pegi was committed to being an artist above all else. That she was able to achieve her goal attests to her talent, her single-minded commitment, and the beguiling force of her personal-

Pegi Nicol MacLeod. *The Slough (verso)*, 1928. Oil on board. Collection of Marta Smith and Robert Muir.