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Seven people, one bedroom

After Sakina's in-laws moved in, the count in the one-bedroom apartment was up to three adults, four children. They tried to make do with the one bed and the couch but then Abida, who didn't have a coat, got the flu and passed it on to all four children ...

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By JAN WONG
Saturday, February 14, 2004 - Page M1

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Sakina Iqbal is happy at the moment, despite being home alone with four little kids, no husband and no vacuum cleaner. "Thanks God," she murmurs, at the news that her brother and sister-in-law have found temporary work packing shampoo.

The couple's money was running out. But she's happy for herself too. If her brother and sister-in-law start earning something, maybe they can finally move out of her apartment in Thorncliffe Park.

In the 1960s, this enclave tucked between ravines and railway tracks at Don Mills Road and Eglinton Avenue was a fashionable address for young professionals. Developers designed its 35 apartment buildings for 12,500 residents.

Today, 30,000 people, mostly newcomers like Sakina and her relatives, crowd onto this former racetrack.

There's so much cooking that the hallways reek of musty oil. And when the children are rushing to and from school, people complain that the elevators are so crowded they must wait for several trips before squeezing on.

An unknown number, like Sakina, have doubled up. Sakina is a pseudonym. She requested anonymity, fearing eviction if her landlord knew that she had seven people in her one-bedroom apartment. (Her brother, Nasir Ali, and his wife, Abida Manzoor, aren't listed on the lease and don't mind using their real names.)

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BE THE FIRST

Abida, a physiotherapist from Pakistan, volunteers at a nearby clinic to gain Canadian experience. But



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nearby clinic to gain Canadian experience. But desperate to earn money, she and her husband also found evening work, at \$8.25 an hour, at a Scarborough factory.

Their shift ends at midnight, so Sakina looks after their

two-year-old son.

That includes changing his diapers. "Yes, more work, but it's okay," says Sakina, a maternal woman, elegantly dressed in *shalwar* and *kameeze* (pantaloons and tunic) of burnt-orange silk shot with gold thread.

Considering the children underfoot, Sakina keeps the apartment astoundingly neat. But with the coffee table substituting for a kitchen table, the living-room carpet is inevitably speckled with bits of food. Fetching a broom from the balcony and sweeping vigorously, she sighs. "Four or five times a day I clean." In her former life, as the daughter of a rural landowner, she had several servants, including a full-time "sweeper" and a nanny.

When Nasir and Abida arrived last November, Sakina offered them her only bed. After all, her own husband was permanently absent. She and her three children -- seven months to seven years -- slept in the living room. Abida, who had been out job hunting without a winter coat, caught the flu and passed it on to the children.

"Seven nights I didn't sleep," says Sakina, 33. After that, when her children complained of being cold, she bought a second bed. Now, Nasir sleeps on the couch and the two women and the four children crowd into the bedroom.

The \$845-a-month apartment is L-shaped, with well-kept parquet floors and huge windows that let in the afternoon sun. In the bedroom, though, a closet door is broken. And in the galley kitchen, the Formica counter is blistered and the cabinet doors are thick with too many layers of cream paint. One corner of the fan hood is charred. Soot smears the ceiling.

"I was cooking fries," says Sakina, sheepishly. "The kids were crying." Baby on hip, she stirs some chickpeas on the stove, then measures several cups of basmati rice, rinses it and tosses it into the pot. She sets the baby in an armchair in the living room, then slices cucumber and green cabbage -- without a chopping board -- into the palm of her hand. She mixes garlic and coriander into a saucer of yogurt.

"Another question?" she says briskly.

Yes, why does she rinse each dish before she uses it? "Here, always cockroaches at night. Worse than Pakistan." There are mice too. "I throw the shoes. It dies," she says with a shudder, noting that she has killed two so far.

A video of her brother's arranged marriage plays on the television set. Abida, glowing and glamorous, is wearing a maroon-and-green silk *langa cholle*, a fitted blouse and floor-length skirt. Sakina likes watching the video because she missed the wedding. She and her husband, an agricultural researcher in Islamabad, had already moved to England so he could study for a PhD in genetic engineering at the University of Liverpool.

Their marriage had been arranged too. First cousins, her father and his mother are brother and sister. Their first child, a son, was born in Pakistan. Their daughter was

born in Liverpool, but wasn't granted British citizenship. Their third child, also a daughter, was born in Toronto. "She's already Canadian," says Sakina, with a huge smile.

Her family moved here from Liverpool in 2000, after immigration officials assured her husband that Canada needed his skills. But he spent the next two years

pursuing the Canadian dream in a minimum-wage landscape.

"Only Tim Hortons. He tried. So very, very hard," says Sakina, who studied English in high school, but says she has "a grammar problem." She has no time for free conversation classes at the Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office, funded by the United Way. (A devout Muslim, she can't even get to the nearby mosque. She prays the requisite five times a day -- at home.)

In late 2002, after postdoctoral research at the University of Guelph, her husband finally found work in Japan. He returned last July for their daughter's birth, staying long enough to move them into Thorncliffe Park, hook up their computer to the Internet and hang a picture of Liverpool above the sofa. Then he left.

"That's why I have a big problem," says Sakina, lifting her embroidered tunic to feed her baby.

She talks to her husband every day by phone or e-mail. "My girl misses Papa. Sometimes she's crying," says Sakina, referring to their four-year-old. Her husband is even lonelier. "He said, 'You have the kids. You can talk to the kids. I don't have kids or wife.' " While she nurses the baby, three other children, including a friend's four-year-old son, are playing with Abida's hair ornaments in the bedroom.

The baby needs a diaper change. A telltale odour indicates Abida's son needs one too. Sakina's life would drive many women crazy. It's not just the semi-permanent houseguests, whose baggage includes financial worries, flu bugs and four outsized suitcases stacked against the bedroom wall. Her world is circumscribed by grocery shopping, doctor's visits and trips to the bank. She can barely remember the last time she visited a friend.

The children are housebound too. Abida's son, for instance, has left the apartment just once or twice since arriving in November. Although a playground is two minutes away, he doesn't have winter boots. And the wind chill that daunts many Torontonians feels excruciating to anyone from the Tropic of Cancer.

The children have migrated to the living room. Their new game is tearing up their brother's Grade 1 homework. Scraps of paper litter the floor. The phone rings -- just as someone knocks at the door. Sakina takes a message for Abida about a job interview, then rushes to the door. It's her friend, back from her doctor's appointment. Sakina politely sets a gold-rimmed glass of water before her, then brings out plates of fragrant rice and chickpeas, salad and chicken curry. The kids rush up to the coffee table. Her friend starts to eat.

But Sakina is back in the kitchen. While she simmers tea leaves for *chai*, she scarfs a plate of rice at the counter. Then she pours some milk into the pot. While it heats, she washes the dishes. With no dishtowel handy, she dries them with her *dupatta*, or long scarf.

The milk foams. Sakina strains the *chai* into mugs. In the living room, her daughter is sliding down the back of an armchair. Her friend's child has climbed onto the window sill and is watching the street. Her friend is still eating. So is Abida's son.

windowsill and is yanking the drapes. Her friend is still eating. So is Abida's son, who is spilling rice onto the carpet. Sakina sits down to breast-feed her daughter again. She has no time to drink *chai*.

Next week: Part Four

Coming up

Feb. 21: Amir Kassam, Abida's landlord, remembers being a former Thorncliffe Park tenant himself.

Feb. 28: Abida makes cold calls in a cold land.

March 6: Gharzai Ranzooryar, who was a doctor in Afghanistan, holds down two low-paying jobs to keep his three-generation family together.

March 13: Gharzai's sister, Durkhanai Ranzooryar, embraces her Muslim identity at U of T.

March 20: Gharzai's seven-year-old daughter, Deewa Ranzooryar, is an all-Canadian kid at the largest elementary school in North America.

March 27: William Xu and Julie Wu, an entrepreneurial couple from China, whose first baby is due during this week of March, pin their hopes on a single internship at GE.

April 3: Gordon Membery and Frances Haist, a retired WASP couple, reflect on the changing neighbourhood.

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