

My name is Billie. I am 62. Some days I feel a lot older than that.

I remember my grandma being so busy doing so many things all day, taking care of everyone, cooking, shopping—I don't know where she got the energy. She was a hummingbird. Compared to her my body is clumsy, heavy, slow.

I am on welfare now. I have been for quite a few years. Maybe since I was about 50? But I haven't always been on welfare—not that there is anything wrong with that. Some people have problems and they need help, right? We can't let people in our community starve.

I have worked a lot of jobs, on and off over the years... waitressing in restaurants when I was young, later as a gardener. Usually I didn't stay in a job too long. I was a partier in those days, and I liked change anyway. I enjoyed trying new things and meeting new people all the time. I was on welfare for a while when the kids were young—I couldn't afford decent childcare so it just made most sense to be with the kids at the beginning. Plus, of course, Dan kept disappearing, leaving me to deal with everything. He'd be there for a while. Then he'd take off; then he'd come back again. It was hard.

I never had a job with a pension. I didn't even earn much CPP over the years, working here and there, and often just for cash. Welfare forced me apply for CPP at 60. I get \$42 a month. But they subtract that off my cheque, so it doesn't really help things.

These days I have a lot of health problems: arthritis, diabetes, stomach pain—they can't figure out what it is. I have a lot of pain some days and I can't walk very far. I've always done work that demanded a lot of my body—that is the only kind of work I could do, 'cause I didn't do much school. I always worked hard and been a good employee, but I can't do that kind of work anymore. And anyway, when I have a bad pain day I can barely think straight.

Here is what I get on welfare: \$637.92. That's including the \$42 from CPP. I would get \$657, but they are taking \$20 off every month until I pay back the damage deposit I needed for my last move. If I was on the higher level of disability I could get about \$300 more a month. I've applied a few times, but I always get denied. I can't understand why. It doesn't seem fair.

My welfare worker says I can't get disability because I don't have much help around the house, or with personal things. Well, that is because I can't afford to pay anyone for that help until I get the disability benefit. I don't feel good about asking my kids to help. Besides, Rose and Annie live so far away now—what could they do? Max has been a help to me when I have to move apartments, carrying things, borrowing a truck from a friend sometimes. But I can't imagine him helping around the house. Or helping me get out of the bathtub—how embarrassing! He is a good son. But he has his own life.

One of my biggest problems is finding a decent place to live on what you get on welfare. It's impossible to find a decent, cheap place to live these days. Once you pay your rent, you have almost nothing left for food. This wasn't such a big deal when I was able to make it to a drop-in at lunch time. But most days I can't do that anymore. I'm lucky that I get a bus pass now that I'm over 60, but even with a bus pass, it's hard to get around. And I can't handle being around so many people

all day, just to wait for lunch. I like to get out and see my friends, but some of those drop-ins are so crowded. I don't feel safe there anymore.

I heard about an older woman in the neighbourhood getting mugged the other day. It was right after cheque day, and he got all her money for the month. I feel like an easy target these days, ever since I got my cane: I mean, it's so obvious that if you grabbed my bag I couldn't run after you.

Really, since I am home a lot these days, the thing I wish for more than anything else is a cozy, safe place to live, someplace quiet. Something I can afford on welfare.

I have moved over 20 times in the last 12 years. Sometimes I hear about a cheaper place. Then I end up having to move because the landlord won't fix the toilet, or the sink. I waited years on a housing wait list, only to move in and find the place full of bed bugs. I had to move again right away, even though the rent was great. You can't live like that. I'm on another list now, but that'll take years again. It's really discouraging.

Once I was assaulted by a guy who was able to break into my place because the lock on the door was old. Then the landlord wouldn't fix the door; so I had to move as soon as I got out of the hospital, and by then a bunch of my stuff had been stolen. People tell me I should make a complaint to someone—but who? I am not good at writing those kinds of letters—I was never good at writing—and arthritis makes my writing hard to read. Really, I don't want to have to talk about what happened over and over again to strangers. I want to forget. I just don't know how to complain to get things to happen.

Honestly, at this point I can't keep moving. It is too tiring for me now. So I have sort of settled now. I pay \$550 for a place with a door that has a working lock. That's a lot of money, I know, but that's also my bottom line: a clean room with a working lock. But I feel like I am worth more than that. My grandma had a big old house, quiet at night, in a safe neighbourhood with houses with yards, lots of trees. I have one room and a working lock.