

Garland, Texas, 1993

by Curtis C. Morgan

I had spent much of the previous year working out of town and had accumulated a small nest egg. I decided to try my hand at flipping houses. What I expected to find in Garland, Texas, were the usual things—cracked foundations, bad wiring, leaky roofs. What I found instead were two stories that had nothing to do with the house and everything to do with the people around it.

I was looking at the vacant house when I saw a man working in the yard across the street. On the theory that a neighbor might know something about the defects of a house, I walked over and introduced myself. His name was Neal.

He told me a family had lived in the house. The father had died unexpectedly. The daughter, a teenager, had taken it badly. She kept saying she wanted to go be with him. One day she went into the bathroom and shot herself.

He was a little shaken as he told it, as much for the family as for the girl. It did not answer the question I had come to ask, which was whether there was anything wrong with the house.

I went inside the empty house and found the bathroom. There was a hole in the drywall. I put my finger into it and wondered if this was where the bullet had gone. It was hard to imagine what else it might be. Then again, it was just as hard to understand why no one had patched it. Perhaps the rest of the family had left the next day. I will never know.

What I remember most is not the hole, but the waste of it. She was not going to join her father. She had simply added another shock to a family already reeling. When I came back outside, Neal was still in his yard, and I crossed over again. We picked up where we had left off, but he had moved on from the house. In fact, he seemed to want to. After a while he turned toward his front door, and I followed him inside.

There was a baby on the couch inside his house, making small, contented sounds. A young woman—his daughter, as it turned out—passed briefly through the room to check on her.

Neal began to tell me about his daughter. He had not approved of her boyfriend. The man was Black. When the child was born, Neal wanted nothing to do with the baby. He said this plainly. For several months, he kept his distance. He wouldn't even touch her or cuddle her.

Then one day he found himself alone in the house with the baby. She began to fuss. And it occurred to him, suddenly and completely, that she did not know any of this. She did not know what he thought of her parents. She did not know anything about race. She was just a baby, and she needed to be picked up and attended to.

So he did.

He told it without drama, as something that had become obvious to him all at once. He had been wrong, and then he wasn't.

As he spoke, he reached over and gave the child a light caress. It was nothing much. The baby was already content.

It was enough.



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