

WHAT IS PAID FOR

by Eric Boyd

The lock came off easy—they only screwed a hinged hasp on the outside—it took a hard shove to get past a chair barricading the door. As I pushed my way in I heard a screeching crash. Lucky nobody was around. It was my first time bidding on a sheriff's sale property, and the fact that you weren't allowed to see the inside made no sense. I'd saved up a few thousand dollars I wanted to keep out of the bank. After the divorce, I didn't trust money I couldn't hold in my hands. But in any case, that's a lot to maybe waste on a house with a barricaded door.

The writ had the place listed on 19th Avenue. Most of the block was for sale. I knew the area, used to live in town. Over the years a lot of buildings nearby were rented or sold as halfway houses that never got looked after, taken care of. Down a few blocks a kid that heard voices set a huge fire that took out two buildings. Seemed like, one way or another, more people were leaving this town than staying. But if the property was cheap enough, I'd take a look.

The outside of the house wasn't much to look at, but not terrible. A modest mill hunky's home from the old days, when this was a boomtown. I was more interested in what was inside. Through the front door was the living room. The kitchen was on the left, through a beaded doorway, taking up a corner. The fridge was open and the mint linoleum counters were bubbled, cracking. I tried noting everything to keep track of how much it'd cost to get the house up and going; after all, just because you buy something doesn't mean you've paid for it.

The air was damp. I opened the blinds to let some streetlight into the living room. The walls were deep yellow, almost amber, with smoke. A harsh smell of crushed cigarette butts. Empty packs of Doral Light Menthols were scattered on the floor, mostly around the white leather couch.

I sat down and turned off my flashlight. So far the house wasn't horrible, or, at least, there's worse out there. One time, I almost bid

on a house without a roof. That's why they don't let you view the property. A guy I first met at the VFW, Terry, he liked to joke about that one, saying whoever got that house had a black cloud over them soon as they stepped inside. Terry got me interested in the Sales, he'd done it a few times. One house he got for less than \$1,000, this place once owned by a guy that was serving for a few armed robberies. Terry flipped it to this little family and they paid everything up front. They were there about three months. One day a neighbor called the cops because they hadn't seen anyone going in or out for a while. They were stacked up in the attic like lincoln logs, next to piles of ripped up newspaper. Supposedly one of the cops found a bundle of cash the previous owner missed, wrapped up in the paper and stuffed in the rafters. The place went up for auction again but Terry didn't touch it.

Sneaking into the properties was the only way to be sure, he told me. I was learning quick. One time, Terry said, he went into a house and checked out the bathroom; in it was a handsome old tub, the kind with lion's feet. But inside the tub was the house's oven. He said he just closed the bathroom door and left. He never bid on that one. But he'd learned how to bid on others, and made some good money doing it. He got me interested in it because I wanted to do it better than he did. He got me interested in it because I hated him.

I took a pack of cigarettes from my jacket pocket and lit one. On the three-legged coffee table was a manila envelope and a brochure for WIC. I set my flashlight down to glance the brochure, then heard a noise below me, like a scurry. Probably a rat, a problem that could cost as much as a hammer or the entire house. The only other doorway was on the left side of the wall in front of me. I grabbed my flashlight and walked over slowly. The door led down to a basement. I heard another scurry.

I scanned the basement. Unfinished; junk everywhere. The smell of mold floated up and lined my nose like silt. Going further in, another noise—this time behind me—but nothing. I whipped my head around the room, swinging my flashlight in every corner. Cigarette ash fell onto my shirt and burned. Damn polyester polos.

The flashlight fell from my hand as I beat my chest frantically. I patted it out, feeling a hole in my shirt big enough to poke a finger through. I retrieved the flashlight and continued looking. If there were rats, I didn't see any.

Next to the fuse box I noticed a sort of knick-knack mantel as I started to go back up the steps. A few recent Iron City beer cans from the Steelers' last two championships, all emptied out the bottom. Next to the cans was a cigar box; inside, sandwich baggies with numbers written on them, each containing a dried flower. Underneath the baggies were old photographs. Some professional, some snapshots, a few polaroids; each photo highlighted the flower in it. Carnations and sequins. Red roses and white dresses, white roses and black dresses. A few more. There were all these things in the house I had been paying attention to, but I wasn't thinking about what they meant. I knew I wasn't supposed to be in there, but I was beginning to feel like I shouldn't be.

Back on the ground floor I peered down the hall, a door at the end and another on the right side. I walked down carefully, trying to listen for any more noises. The walls were lined with nails, picture frames littered the ground. I opened the door straight ahead, which went into the bathroom. It was small, filled with soft light from the street outside, coming in through a brick-glass window above the tub. The walls were covered in hokey black velvet wallpaper with embossed gold leaf designs that couldn't possibly be holding up to the moisture of a bathroom, but I bet the owners liked it. I opened the mirror above the sink. Next to a flat tube of toothpaste was an orange pill bottle, no label, filled with liquid. I picked it up and saw the top of lid was written on: Holy Water. I put it back.

Behind the door on the right was the bedroom. I peeked my head in; the first thing I saw on the vanity dresser was the top of an old wedding cake— I didn't enter.

I needed to sit down and think everything over. Maybe this wasn't for me. I went down the hall and back into the living room. A woman stood there, by the couch. Her silhouette was tall and thin. She was smoking one of my cigarettes. So pale she almost glowed. The room

grew and shrank. I felt dizzy, ill, staring at the front door. I had to get out of this house.

From opposite ends of the room our faces briefly illuminated for one another with each nervous draw of our cigarettes. I'd been rummaging through her life for the past hour. Choked up, the woman said, "This is mine. This isn't yours."

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"Who is he?" I asked.

"None of your business." Francine tried closing the door in my face.

The divorce had been final less than a week. I signed everything and tried not to think about the reasons why. She even got custody of Justin—that hurt. I could try to deal with it as long as I got my rightful visits, but it became something else when I called to pick up a few things and a man answered the phone. I went to the house—our house—and she wouldn't let me in.

"You don't owe me a thing, sure. That's not my business, but it does goddamn concern me who's in there with my six-year old son."

Francine's eyes widened. "It's not some pervert, if that's what you're implying."

"A stranger's a stranger." I paused. "Or have you known him a while?" The smell of pork chops drifted from the kitchen window on the side of the house. My favorite.

"Be civil, Warren." Terry came to the door. "How's come I'm some terrible monster all of a sudden?" He smiled. "I've known Justin all his life."

"You sonofa—"

"Warren, be civil," he said again. "Your eyes's buggin' out, we don't need anybody taking a heart attack. Just be cordial."

"How long?" I asked. Either of them could have answered.

"It doesn't matter," Francine said.

"Just another thing that's none of my business, huh?" I started to shove my way into the house. Terry pushed Francine out the way; she fell and, as much as I hated her then, I hated him for touching her that way.

"I'll make your boy a bastard," he said. There was something in his hand behind the door. "I don't want to."

I looked over his shoulder. Francine was getting up from the floor, dusting her legs off and clearing her hair off her face. "He hurt you?" I asked.

"Hoping he'll hurt you," she said. "Go home."

What a thing to say, I thought.

"I understand you being mad," Terry said. "I'd be mad, too."

"I thought—"

"We are," he said. "We're friends, and I'm sorry. That's why I keep saying it, let's be amicable about all this."

"You're just a regular damn thesaurus, huh?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Get him out of here, Terry!"

"Now, now. He has a right to get his things, at least."

"He has the right to kiss my ass."

The door closed in my face. Muffled, I could hear Terry say, "Ain't nobody kissing that big ass but me." Then giggles. The sound of their steps.

I waited, looking around the house for a while. Terry couldn't wait to get a Trump sign in my yard; the last time we'd spoken at the VFW he was getting on me for wearing a Sanders pin. I told him some kid gave it to me, but actually I'd bought it myself. A waste of three bucks then, but hopefully Terry was wasting his money now. Honestly though, I didn't hold out much hope. America never does the right thing until it does the wrong thing first.

No sun and no clouds that day. No nothing. I thought me and Francine were doing all right, making an honest go of it. Definitely didn't think our marriage was the "living hell" she called it. Maybe I should have known, could have seen something, fixed something. Maybe not. Maybe people lay foundations for you that just blow away like sand. It's not even their fault when it happens. Things just happen. I didn't blame Francine; nobody knew how hard I was to

live with than her, but Terry? Who the fuck was he? Some slick barfly that flipped houses and, apparently, stole them outright.

The door reopened. Terry had some of my things boxed up and on a handcart. "You can take all this today, maybe come back in a few days for the rest. Fran says she wants that chair of yours out by the end of the week. I'll try to talk her down." He grinned lazily.

He wasn't holding whatever he had earlier. I lunged toward him. We rolled around for a while before I got to being on top of him. I grabbed him by the collar, ready to jerk his head down onto the front steps.

"Hey! Hey!" Francine shouted from the doorway. "I'll call the cops! I'm going to call the cops!" I saw Justin run up behind her and hug her leg. He stared at me.

I looked at Terry and whispered, "Now you fucking be civil."

"I'm gonna call the cops," Francine said.

"Hey buddy," I looked at Justin. "Me and Uncle Terry were just wrestling."

Justin tried to smile.

"Uh, yeah," Terry said. "Just having a little fun."

"You sure have been, huh?" I said, then turned to Justin again.

"See, watch this! Here comes the People's Elbow!" I hopped up slightly and came down on Terry's chest as hard as I could, knocking the wind out of him. Justin wasn't smiling anymore. He knew exactly what was happening. Probably better than I did.

Between gasps, Terry said, "You can have that one."

"That's right," I was trying not to choke up. "You already got everything else."

I threw the boxes in the trunk of my car and waved to Justin, who was on top of Terry's shoulders. Through the rearview mirror I watched my son start to wave back, then drop his hand. He became smaller—engulfed by the house, the street, the neighborhood—until he was gone.

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The woman stared at me, nearly in tears. Her hand was clutching something. I said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't realize..." That wasn't true. I realized, but the thing was, I didn't care.

"I don't have much," she said. Her hand gripped into a fist.

"Ma'am, I been too clever by half tonight, and I see that was foolish. I'm leaving now."

Something like snowflakes fell between her fingers. Her hand opened and a crumpled dandelion stem dropped to the carpet. She moved toward me. "You can stay. Nobody stays."

I thought of shoving past her and running away, out the door and down the street. I imagined the yellow glow of my flashlight waving wild against the ground and the trees; imagined going past my car, the Avenues, my old house, myself. But I didn't. "You're right, ma'am." We sat down on the floor across from one another. "Nothing and nobody."

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