

## **The Auction**

*By Pete Planisek*

Honestly, I didn't think about her very often; the neighbor two houses down on the street that connected to my own. I'd never said a word to her, at least none that I could recall. Not because I had any reason not to but because she always struck me as a bit of a recluse. Why? Well, I only ever saw her outside doing one of two activities. One was cutting her grass. The other was when she'd pull her car up to her mailbox, grab the contents, and then back her car into her garage. And that was it. I never saw company over or her talking to other neighbors. The house typically remained dark even after the sunset.

It was her business. I noticed these things as part of the routine symphony all of us fall into without even trying. For most of my neighbors, I was probably just that guy they saw walking his dog in the morning and late afternoon. What conclusions about me that they'd drawn from this habitual activity of mine I couldn't say. But on the morning of the auction, I paused to consider it.

Though I'd never known her something about waking up and seeing a throng of strangers scouting through her belongings disturbed me. The dog woke me up. Usually any movement outside sets him off but despite the large number of people (I never bothered to count) the collective noise they generated was eerily low. My first thought was simply that a number of family members had come to assist in moving. Looking back I guess there were plenty of clues that a day like this was inevitable.

During the particularly brutal winter we'd collectively suffered through, her drive and sidewalk were barely touched. Again I thought little of this since I'd seen her pay an

enterprising teen to clear these off in the past. Perhaps they'd just missed each other. It might take a while but the snow was bound to melt.

Then one day there were different cars in the driveway. No, they'd started being parked out on the street before moving to the driveway. Had she moved and I hadn't noticed? If that house was abandoned, how long had it been so? Two other houses across the street had emptied out at some point during the winter. Ever since the Great Recession abandoned homes weren't exactly a new thing but still it surprised me.

Those cars remained outside and every once in a while when I was walking the dog the garage door would be open, revealing stacks of items and boxes. Not unusual when people were settling into a new place. But the boxes never dwindled; the mass in the garage grew. Then about two weeks ago the cars in the driveway vanished. And the house remained dark and silent as ever.

The morning of the auction found what remained of the lawn (it had reverted largely to clumps of various types of weeds) hidden beneath a mass of tables and gawkers, hunting for ... something. As it dawned on me what I was watching, a long forgotten memory returned. Why had I forgotten it until now?

Months ago (that's the closest I can get) the sound of nearby sirens caught my attention. I'd been in the office; no changing the bed sheets when I'd heard it. Living so close to a fire station for so many years has made the wail of emergency vehicles common place. So unless the lights or sirens announce themselves in close proximity, my mind simply confines them to the background soundtrack of everyday life. No, they'd been close that day enough for even me to notice. The squad had parked in her drive but I'd drawn the wrong conclusion. Several times in

the past a member of the house on the corner had been whisked away by ambulance and there'd been cars in their driveway. I'd been witness to the woman's fate without even realizing it; mistaking the events as being connected to the people on the corner.

Had she died then or lingered in some medical facility for months? Was this the result of some accident; these split houses do have a lot of stairs. Could she have been struggling with an on-going illness or even a recent one? I hope she didn't die alone – with friends and loved ones far away.

I looked passively outside at the auction about to unfold. Part of me wanted to judge these people who were there covetously pawing over the woman's belongs. Were any of them even thinking about what they were doing, about her? Maybe I was just trying to assuage some sense of guilt I couldn't fully explain. I kept thinking how I should have made more of an effort to talk to her. But she hadn't sought me out either.

Then I began to look at the objects now assembled on the sea of folding tables and the larger pieces propped up against the side of the house. Do such items really say anything about us? Had she felt proud on the day she'd purchased that bed set? Had she worked hard to find those matching lamps? Had any of this made her feel more complete or successful? Or did all of this exist to fulfill need? Is this auction what she wanted or was this something someone else had decided for her?

We like to say that material items don't matter, but we spend an obscene amount of our lives gathering, searching for, trading, updating, and storing an assortment of things. A collection like the one I was looking at; that in a few hours' time would scatter to become woven into another person's life.

The auctioneer was a pro; voice, dress, even the provided RV with the sunshade that was selling food and drink indicated that. Beyond the money from the sale did he have any deeper thoughts about what was really happening to this woman's legacy? Was he or anyone else in the crowd evaluating the life she'd lived based on the items being bid upon?

The auction bidding was just beginning as I finished walking the dog. We'd headed away from the crowds since my dog always reacts loudly to them. And I'd have felt guilty somehow if I'd gone over and looked any closer at what was being sold. Even though I'd never known the woman, for some reason, it felt like a betrayal.

There was a low, constant hum and flow as the auctioneer and his partners methodically sold everything the woman had possessed at the end of her life. It was all so quiet. In the end all I could do was pause and for a moment and hope that she'd been happy. I went about my day and four days later a FOR SALE sign went up in the weed choked yard of the empty house.



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