

The House Next Door Died

My husband and I moved to our new home in 2006. We were excited, busy, and bubbly about our neighborhood, the multitude of parks, and the 140 miles of walking trails.

There never seemed to be time for the widower next door. We met and spoke from time to time, but in the scurry of life, he remained remote. He was in his eighties, and when his health began to fail, his daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter moved in. I went to greet them as they stepped up to the plate for their dad. After that day, we waved when we saw each other, but still I knew nothing of their day-to-day lives, nor did they have an inkling of ours. Jim, the widower, didn't need that much looking after; in spite of poor health, he worked at the golf course every day. But one day about two years ago, he passed away. I went to the funeral, informed the neighbors of his death, and encouraged them to leave sympathy cards at the door. I visited his bereaved children. After that, it was estrangement as usual. Maybe it was not traditional estrangement, but certainly there was only minimal engagement, or at least that's what I thought.

Time went by and last week they moved. Their daughter graduated from high school; it was time to sell the family home. My husband and I found ourselves involved in the move. It was like watching TV. "What is happening now?" We offered help. They ran out of time and had to pitch good things; I went through their trash every day. We have their castoffs in the garage to take to Goodwill. My friend discovered the perfect treasure trash table and lamp for her apartment.

As they slipped away, we talked with our neighbors. We heard family stories. Kids had grown in this house. Lives were transformed. Hope sprang anew and then quietly retired. Now it was the end of an era. I heard Mary stories. She died before we moved in. It seems we had a lot in common. I would have loved Mary. I have a new dining room set, a wrought iron outdoor table, and an assortment of cast offs populating my home. I thought about Mary picking out that dining room set and how excited she must have been. Her dining room cabinet is beside me as I write. Her dream is in my life now. It reminds me of her. It is my new bookshelf and storage closet. It's a handsome piece. I love the books. They had some notes about diet, and certain portions underlined; they were Mary's books. When I read them, I feel like she's with me. Mary died in 2002. I never met her yet I feel like I'm meeting her now. It's as if her ghost is hanging around gathering the family stardust in her arms.

My family room faces the side of the house. The house used to be alive with activity. Every night I sat down and could see the shadowy figures rove around the bedroom. Someone was leaving and going much of the time. When I was upstairs, I always made sure I was covered as I scampered by the window facing the house. Now when I gaze out the window, there is nothing. It is like that house itself has died. Without a family, the house is nothing. And it has impacted me. The first few days I felt that something was really wrong. It was disconcerting. This thing affects my guts. Today there are men putting on a new roof; they seem like interlopers. An investor bought the house and, as people work to remodel it, I cry. I know they are building someone else's dream and I could be happy that new people are coming. The house will reincarnate, but I am sad. Don't ask why. I can't tell you the underlying reasons or even what's going on, but I can tell you that the house is dead and I am mourning the loss.

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