

Rich at Heart

Red brick exterior: the resident has puritan morals. Drawn blackout shades: he's also a privacy activist.

Dual chimneys: owned by a storyteller. Neoclassical symmetry: an atheist.

Matt scanned the road, accidentally reading each neighbor's thoughts as the car rolled by. Their opinions were embodied in the designs of their homes, proving to Matt that there was nothing so permanent as a stubborn idea.

Water filtration tank: a sign of both a conspiracy theorist and a nonconformist. He's probably an idiot, too.

What about Trent? Matt ground his teeth and thought about his brother. *Is Trent an idiot? He's a nonconformist, for sure. Probably he's both.*

Some solar panels on two of the rooftops gleamed down at him. Matt was putting money aside so he could purchase his own array next year. It was his way of showing his neighbors how a real progressive acts. *My house won't look as conceited as the solar panel activists' in this neighborhood.*

It's hard for your ideas to keep pace with the times. Alternative energy wasn't important when Matt's house was built, so he couldn't have known to plan for it. And that wasn't the biggest deficiency of his house. It was just the biggest one that he could afford to address. The whole structure was built on a foundation of patriarchy that he didn't like trying to defend. He had ditches running along the property, which made it harder to talk with the neighbors. The front façade was flanked by imposing white porch columns. The sturdy columns lent a welcome touch of traditionalism. But Matt worried that they looked vaguely racist in the dark. He couldn't fix those big problems, so he had to learn to live with them. Everybody knew about flaws in their home that they worked around. Everyone wished that their home, and therefore their life, could be more modern.

Matt drove slower and slower until he finally pulled over and walked out onto the median. *This is how I can make a difference.* In the manicured grass, a parade of campaign signs endorsed Ron Starr for congressman. Matt walked down the row and plucked them up. The soggy ground was leaving mud on his toes. It was annoying, and it made the signs seem more

human, even aggressive. Matt didn't have to feel guilty about uprooting them anymore. He dumped them into his car. Somebody honked, but Matt didn't look into the traffic. The signs had been no more welcome than if pollution were killing the grass.

For the rest of the drive, Matt didn't see anywhere to get rid of the signs. *Anyway, I don't have to hide anything from Trent. If he wants to pry, then that's his own personal problem.* Matt buzzed himself through the gate onto Trent's driveway. A construction dumpster next to the house looked like a perfect place to deposit his stolen load.

While everyone else worked around their home's flaws, Trent was an exception. He didn't have to tolerate anything he didn't love. Trent earned money as easily as breathing. Six months ago, Trent was remodeling his home with expansive windows. He had heard that social networks made privacy obsolete, and he decided he would believe it. He opened the front of his home with a full view to and from the street. Any passerby could watch him take his coffee. Recently, it was said that subtle privacy rules lived on in social networks after all, because people were careful to distinguish between strangers and friends and best friends. Trent was willing to believe that instead. The picture windows were removed, and an ongoing construction project was creating an expansive porch in their place, so Trent could live in view of the public when he wanted. Every time he got interested in a paradigm shift, he had the capital to chase after it. Meanwhile, Matt was stuck with his traditional closed house. If he wanted to participate in a blog or an online clique, he would be tightening his belt for years, to install his own public porch.

Trent lumbered off of his porch bench. He noticed the stack of trashed signs in the car's back seat right away. He greeted Matt by congratulating, "I can't believe you're campaigning for Starr!"

Matt felt more acid in his smile than he had intended. "No, I'm not. Really. I pulled these up out of the ground on my way here."

Trent leaned in to examine the back seat. "I should march you back there and make you set them back up."

"Starr deserves it," Matt deflected, and left for the porch.

Trent chased after him and chided, "You're such a communist. Starr is going to win, and you're going

to waste your vote on someone who loves lawyers and hates America.”

Am I normally this touchy? wondered Matt. “I’m voting for Willow, even though he’s an idiot! You shouldn’t gloat. You’ll be sorry when Starr is in Congress and the country starts another war.” Jim Willow was a pacifist and an independent candidate who was predicted to win a 5% sliver of the vote. Ron Starr, his polar opposite, was a popular war hawk. According to Matt, he believed that foreign languages were a tool of the devil.

It was hard for your ideas to keep pace with the times: Matt would prefer to kick Jim Willow as soon as vote for him, but that wasn’t the way Matt’s house was shaped. When his house was new, there had been an unconnected mother-in-law apartment on the property. During the Vietnam era, he had built a bridge between the apartment and the main structure, as a gesture of peace. Because of that, Matt was stuck, decades older, voting for a pacifist. The peacenik architecture would ensure that his allegiance belonged to a radical like Jim Willow. Matt’s ideology during the sixties had been set in stone. *Ideas like that could be a prison. But my friends have told me how freethinkers are always bridge builders.*

Trent pressed on, “If you would go tear down your ridiculous bridge, and then add some patriotic cornice work, then you would be a Starr supporter too.” Matt thought about all the money that this suggestion would cost, and he felt his throat constrict. His hands and head weighed down his shoulders.

Matt stared across the street at the scaffolded husk of a new building taking shape. The owner was named Logan, and he lived inside, even though there was only a gaping hole where the roof should be. Charred remains of the old house still laid in the side yard. The fire had started in the den. Logan had been reading philosophy in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Then a transformative new perspective hit him like a bolt of lightning. His cigarette fell from his lips and ignited the library. The straight lines of the house’s frame were burned down to the foundation. Trent eventually remarked that Logan had been playing with fire, because no one should allow dangerous books like that in their home. Logan’s tastes were so changed that the new house he was erecting was defined by organic curves, a water feature, and an aversion to right angles. He was still exploring the ramifications of his ideas,

hence the lack of a roof. There were a dozen ways that he might finish off the structure, so he waited to build it until he knew which design would complement his floor plan. In the meantime, Logan lived the life of a nomad, meekly exposed to all the elements and likewise the sharp barbs of his conservative critics. Matt felt that it was a burden just to watch this senseless sacrifice. *Logan’s original home and his original philosophies had been beautiful, and Logan was foolhardy to have discarded them.*

Trent complained, “The problem you’ll always have with your house is that you aren’t willing to make the changes that you know are right.”

The word “always” fell around Matt like a demolition. *The improvement projects never end. Decades from now, I’ll still be fighting with the latest trends. All my time and money are falling into a black hole that doesn’t reward me back.*

“You don’t even understand how hard it is to suddenly change your life like that,” erupted Matt. “You’ve been out of touch ever since you came into money, and no one gave you any common sense to go with it. I’d have to get some paper routes on the side just to have a chance at paying for my dream home. And what’s the most I could hope for? I could end up like you, shifting walls around more often than a funhouse. Or I could end up like Logan, living out in the rain because a traditional roof isn’t attractive enough.

“I don’t even like who I’ve become now! I’ve been dreading the election. I get defensive whenever someone argues with me about politics. My neighbors think it’s my fault there are ditches between our yards, just because my budget can’t help repair them. Then I’ve got to deal with your impossible standards. Who’s to say whether my plans are even moving me in the right direction?” Trent looked scared, just like when they argued as children. He shrugged. Matt caught his breath. “Our opinions take too much work to change. It’s time I started spending my energy on something more worthwhile. No more lost causes for me.”

Matt squared his shoulders. “I may not be able to afford an army of carpenters, but I deserve to be happy. From now on, I’m not doing any more introspection or remodeling. Right or wrong, I’ve always been safe and warm in my house, and I’m going to choose to be happy with it forever. I’m rich at heart, because I don’t need money to be comfortable with my life exactly the way it already is.”