

GENTRIFICATION

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mold. There were new holes in the fabric that I assumed were made by rats. We live in a large waterfront city so there are millions of rodents. It's an expected, if rather unwelcome, part of urban life. In every city in the world, there are more rats than people. But one doesn't throw a potential home for them onto the curb in front of one's house. That mattress was an apartment building for rats. Or at least a vacation home.

I'd thought to call the city and tell them about the mattress, but I doubted that I would have remained anonymous.

I am the only white man living on a block where all of my neighbors are black. Don't get me wrong. My neighbors are like any other group of neighbors I've ever had. They are the same self-appointed guardians, social directors, friendly alcoholics, paranoid assholes, overburdened parents, sullen teenagers, fiery housewives, elderly misers, amateur comedians, and hermits that exist in every neighborhood of every city in the country. They are people, not black people; and I am a person, not a white person. And that is how we relate to one another, as people. I'm not treated as the white guy on the block, at least not overtly or rudely, and I do not treat my neighbors as if they are some kind of aliens. We live as people live, aware of racial dynamics but uninterested in their applications as it applies to our neighborhood.

My next-door neighbors, an older couple with two adult sons living at home, are kind. All four of them often sit on their front porch, sharing snacks and drinks, and greeting everybody who walks past. But they'd been sitting only a few feet away from the mattress they'd so haphazardly tossed onto the curb. How could they have continued to live as if creating such a mess were normal? I wanted to ask them what they planned to do about the mattress, though I wasn't even sure of the older son's name. It's something

A month ago, my next-door neighbors tossed a horribly stained mattress onto the curb in front of their house. Is it possible they believed the mattress would be collected on our next regular garbage day. But the city charges thirty dollars to dispose of bulky items and you have to go online and schedule the pickup. Obviously, my neighbors had not bothered to schedule such an appointment. I'd thought the city, once they'd learned of the abandoned mattress, would have collected it anyway and automatically added the charge, plus a fine, to my neighbors' utility bill.

But four garbage collection days passed and nothing happened. The mattress, dank and dirty to begin with, had begun to

unusually African-sounding that I hadn't quite understood when I'd first met him, and it was too late, a year later, to ask for the proper pronunciation. And that made me feel racist. If his name were something more typical, like Ron or Eddie or Vlad or Pete or Carlos or Juan, then I would have remembered it later. The simple names are easier to remember. So, in this regard, perhaps I am racist.

And, frankly, it felt racist for me to look out my front window at that abandoned mattress and wonder about the cultural norms that allowed my neighbors, so considerate otherwise, to create a health hazard. And why hadn't my other neighbors complained? Or maybe they had complained and the city had ignored the mattress because it was a black neighborhood? Who was the most racist in that situation? Was it the white man who was too terrified to confront his black neighbors on their rudeness? Was it the black folks who abandoned the mattress on their curb? Was it the black people who didn't feel the need to judge the behavior of their black neighbors? Was it the city, which let a mattress molder on the street in full view of hundreds, if not thousands, of people? Or was it all of us, black and white, passively revealing that, despite our surface friendliness, we didn't really care about one another?

In any case, after another garbage day had passed, I rented a U-Haul truck, a flatbed with enough room to carry the mattress, and parked it—hid it, really—two blocks away. I didn't want to embarrass or anger my neighbors so I set my alarm for three a.m. I didn't turn on the lights as I donned gloves, coveralls, and soft-soled shoes. Perhaps I was being overcautious. But it was fun, too, to be on a secret mission.

I slowly opened my front door, worried the hinges might creak, and took step after careful step on the porch, avoiding the loose boards. Then I walked across my lawn rather than on the

sidewalk. A dog barked. It was slightly foggy. A bat swooped near a streetlight. For a moment, I felt like I'd walked into a werewolf movie. Then I wondered what the police would do if they discovered a clean-cut white man creeping through a black neighborhood. "Buddy," the cops would say. "You don't fit the profile of the neighborhood."

I almost laughed out loud at my joke. That would have been a stupid way to get caught.

Then I stood next to the mattress and realized that I hadn't figured out how I was supposed to carry that heavy, awkward, waterlogged thing two blocks to the truck.

Given more time, I probably could have rigged up a pulley system or a Rube Goldberg contraption that would have worked. But all I had that night was brute strength, without the brute.

I kicked the mattress a few times to flush out any rats. Then I grabbed the mattress's plastic handles—thank God they were still intact—and tried to lift the thing. It was heavier than I expected, and smelled and felt like a dead dolphin.

At first I tried to drag the mattress, but that made too much noise. Then I tried to carry it on my back, but it kept sliding from my grip. My only option was to carry the mattress on my head, like an African woman gracefully walking with a vase of water balanced on her head, except without her grace.

Of course, the mattress was too heavy and unbalanced to be carried that way for long. It kept slipping off my head onto the sidewalk. It didn't make much noise when it fell. I was more worried that my lung-burning panting would wake everybody.

It took me twenty minutes to carry that mattress to the truck and another ten to slide it into the flatbed. Then I got behind the wheel and drove to the city's waste disposal facility in

the frontmost neighborhood. But it wouldn't open for another two hours so I parked on the street, lay across the seat, and fell asleep in the truck.

I was awakened by the raw noise of recycling and garbage trucks. I wiped my mouth, ran my fingers through my hair, and hoped that I wouldn't offend anybody with my breath. I also hoped that the facility workers wouldn't think that filthy mattress was mine. But I shouldn't have worried. The workers were too busy to notice one bad-breathed man with one rat-stained mattress.

They charged me forty bucks to dispose of the mattress, and it was worth it. Then I returned the truck to the U-Haul rental store and took a taxi back to my house.

I felt clean. I felt rich and modest, like an anonymous benefactor.

When I stepped out of the taxi I saw my neighbors—mother, father, and two adult sons—sitting in the usual places on their porch. They were drinking Folgers instant coffee, awful stuff they'd shared with me on many occasions.

I waved to them but they didn't wave back. I pretended they hadn't noticed me and waved again. They stared at me. They knew what I had done.

"You didn't have to do that," said the son with the African name. "We can take care of ourselves."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You think you're better than us, don't you?"

I wanted to say that, when it came to abandoned mattresses, I was better.

"Right now, I feel worse," I said.

I knew I had done a good thing, so why did I hurt so bad? Why did I feel judged?

"You go home, white boy," the son said. "And don't you bother us anymore."

I knew the entire block would now shun me. I felt pale and lost, like an American explorer in the wilderness.