

BARRETT BOWLIN

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## As Is

I have yet to meet the dead engineer's wife, which is why I tell our realtor to lowball her on the price for the house. All I know is what my own wife tells me: the old woman has been without her husband for years now, and there's a daughter in Baltimore who seems worried about the widow's health. On my end, there's a faint thrum of desperation in this as it zips down the cell towers, from upstate New York to Louisville now, where I'm visiting for a conference and watching the Ohio River flow outside my hotel room, and so I know that widow will take the offer and that our mortgage will drop by just a bit.

"It's nothing but profit for her," I tell my wife. "She's lived in the house for decades. What did she pay for it?"

But my wife is tired of searching for a place for our children to run in a yard, and she's tired of having her own mother occupy the entirety of the second floor in the house we're renting at present, and she's tired of looking at houses while not having me there, so the low offer she puts in isn't as low as I'd like.

Two months later, after the paperwork has been signed and after our realtor has bought us a round of celebratory drinks, the dead engineer's wife is gone to Baltimore, but she's left so much of her life with the engineer behind. In one of our last visits to the house before the attorneys start the paperwork, she tells us she's leaving the ancient refrigerator in the basement, but now, after we've closed and signed loan agreements, there's much more than that, and it's all filled with dust. Couches, side chairs, night stands, patio furniture, tools in the garage and

basement, more lightbulbs than we know what to do with: it's enough to outfit a family that's not bringing their own weight of things.

And if we look closely around the property, we can see the great number of thermometers the dead engineer installed. External barometers outside the bedroom windows, a thermometer outside the kitchen window, multiple gauges stapled into the doorframe panels, with at least two more in and outside of the garage. I imagine what this is like for the engineer and his wife when they are alive and together: to have metrics available to them never more than a few feet away, to have order, to know exactly what the weather will be like before stepping a foot outside. I don't see them as the type to have lived together long enough for smart phones and morning updates on their computers. And so this is what I imagine what it was like to have live and streaming information, all of it just a few feet away from the windows, before we started thinking of it like we do now. This is a house that prepares you for the day, I realize, and I'm wondering what life is going to be like for the dead engineer's wife now that she's living in Baltimore, with only the memories of the man she was once married to, and the knowledge that he helped build the atomic bomb.

One morning, after meeting the neighbor across the street, he tells me the dead engineer once worked for the Los Alamos chapter of the Manhattan Project. Bulbous and metal-encased bombs were built and detonated in the desert, and I learn that the engineer was there to survey the mesas and the canyons, and to solve problems of heat transfers and explosive castings. I hear from our neighbor that the engineer came back to New York afterward to get his master's in Mechanical Engineering and then to work for IBM before setting up his own surveying business on the side. If I go hunting for it now, I can find old stationery from his LLC taped to the basement walls and the dying light fixtures, and I find myself now curious about what the man saw in the New Mexico heat 70 years ago.

Here, in New York, as we clean and scour the house, I start to look for hidden rolls of test film the man might have clenched into the spaces between the ducts. I read up on the bio the funeral home provided for him online, on a website that hasn't been updated in years. There were a lot of children, I learn, who roamed the halls before we bought the place, and I'm pretty sure they would be the ones to find his cachés if there were any, but I keep looking just the same.

Instead, I find carpeted storage spaces above the stairs where we might hide from the secret police, should they ever come. I find leaks from my bathroom that flow down into the plaster of the living room's ceiling. I find the manuals and warranties the dead engineer affixed to the large appliances he and his second wife purchased,

including the furnace and the AC unit outside, and my wife finds their marriage certificate behind a rusted filing cabinet.

The water damage is just the beginning of the surprises and the disorder the house has for us. In winter, when the furnace has to blow harder than it seems like it might need to, we bring in repairmen, a father and son team, who poke through the ductwork and tell us it's all filled with insulant, blown in there by someone who had no idea what they were doing. The following spring, we learn that a huge space between the roof and the siding of the house is absent any flashing, and that it allows rainwater to soak into the wood and rot it. We think back to when the home inspector came for his final tour of the property, and we start cursing his name more than we do the dead engineer's wife, the woman who sold us the home that just doesn't seem to warm up in New York's cold autumn months. I don't give ill will any power or credence, but when I sign over the check to the repairmen, I send with it the hope that the widow in Baltimore feels a constant need for blankets as the wind whips in from the Atlantic.

Decades ago, when the dead engineer was alive, was a young man in a uniform, there was a group of brilliant scientists the engineer would never meet. These physicists first realized the potential of the atomic age—they lost sleep over it—but they weren't so brilliant that they could see where their ideas would lead. They whispered contingencies among themselves, talked with their military counterparts, and then they met with the President. What was first just a series of coffee clutches and memos at the beginning of the Second World War became secret meetings and alliances in the shadow of Pearl Harbor. Theorems cooked by the likes of Einstein and Oppenheimer and Fermi were chalked onto boards while plans were etched into the dirt.

While most of the labor on the Manhattan Project was done at the production factories in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the project head, Robert Oppenheimer, decided to move the testing and design work on the bombs out to Los Alamos because he had a ranch there. He'd purchased the acreage after leasing it years prior, using the place to dry out during a stint of tuberculosis, eventually calling the property "Perro Caliente" ("hot dog") after buying it outright. When the theoretical physicist was put in charge of the development of the bombs themselves, he moved the site of operations out to the desert, where the Army Corps of Engineers bought up land at eminent-domain values and built testing facilities under the burning sun of the American southwest.

This was where the engineer came to work. After being snatched up from his studies at Ohio State, having left the cold in his birthplace of New York for the

warmer midwest, he surveyed and ranged out the rough terrains of the desert, built prototypes of explosive casings that would wind up in versions of the famed Fat Man, the bomb to end and begin all bombs, the implosive device with a plutonium core that was detonated above Nagasaki. After the war, the bomb was so loved that the Army built dozens of them: orderly things built to create disorder on a nuclear scale, warehousing them until newer and better designs were implemented just a few years later.

The engineer was there at Trinity, as well, when the Fat Man prototype, 'the Gadget,' debuted. I wonder now if he ever got to see directly the visuals of his hard work.

I like to think he did, though.

I like to think he wrestled with the news that his assistance had made the end of the war and the beginning of the atomic age possible.

And I like to think that his home in New York was a place where he could forget the heat of the desert.

Before we close on the house, we divide up the rooms. The bedrooms are all on the second floor, and we decide my daughter will get the room at the far end of the hallway, where she'll have big windows and walls to hang posters and sequined curtains, and where she'll have space for her books. My infant son will have the bedroom next to his sister's because we've already reserved the hollowed-out shelves in there for his diapers, creams, and the white noise generator. In the office parked next to the master bedroom my wife and I share, I move my books and filing cabinets against the walls opposite a built-in desk, one with a large fluorescent light that hangs below the bottom shelf, right at eye level where it blinds me each time I sit down to type. Like a hermit crab, I clean out the space before I inhabit it, before I fill it with myself and my things, and, in the drawers at the bottom of the desk, I see where the dead engineer's wife hasn't bothered to clean or even explore. I find a small box of rock samples from the husband's hobby stash, along with some old graph papers where he's made notes and left a consulting portfolio unfinished.

In these nights after moving into the new home, into the residence with the dusty, pastel drapes that need to be taken down from every window, I stay up and look through the dead engineer's old drawers, hoping for information on his time spent in Los Alamos but finding nothing except old pencils that have fallen through the file folders. Outside, I read on the thermometers that hang just beyond the window panes that it's still warm enough each night to keep the air conditioner running.

In the nighttime, after my wife is passed out from a hard day at work and then a busy evening of unpacking dishes and kitchen appliances, I lie next to her and run

through checklists of what needs to be repaired and properly fixed. There's the jury-rigged running guard of the door between the kitchen and the living room I should rip out and replace. The outlets downstairs and in some of the bedrooms need to be exchanged for grounding boxes that will hold plugs in safely. There's even the reading lamps that perch above us in the bed, the wires of which have been kludged through some sort of adapter that rests next to the baseboard below us. My wife wonders out loud one night how the widow survived her lonely time here without an electrical fire breaking out, but we sleep through this concern for several weeks, as well, just like the dead engineer's wife did.

Her husband's old workbench fixes into a corner in the basement, complete with a set of shelves and cabinets used to hold tools and hardware. The orderly and clean bench has a vise with a well oiled screw and two heavy plates. Separating the bench is a pipe that leads up from the floor and out into the house's exterior, where it vents radon that collects below the concrete pad. The system shoots up a PVC pipe and above the lip of the roof, next to where my children's bedrooms are, and so I start getting worried about molecular weights and atmospheric pressure. To the right of the bench is a counter where the engineer stored jugs of paint thinner and boxes of cleaning solvents, and it's now where we fold laundry and spread my wife's delicates to dry without the use of forced heat. To the left of the bench is the carved-out shelves of screws, nails, washers, and other hardware, all of it stored in the glass of recycled Skippy peanut butter and Claussen pickle jars. Even if I were a carpenter, I think, I would never run through the dead engineer's stock of supplies.

Instead, I use the man's old nails to hang up posters in the neighborhood that advertise garage sales, events I hold on the driveway to get rid of the old couple's things that have been left behind. Their end tables, their artwork, their vases and knickknacks: we haul each piece out of our rooms and either sell them for dollars or put them out in a box at the end of the concrete, for anyone who drives by and reads the 'Free to a Good Home' signs.

The amount of original portraits and wall art the widow leaves behind confuses me most about this house. I learn from the neighbor that the dead engineer was a hobby painter, and that he and his second wife loved to travel. The couple would come home from these exotic locations, and the husband would paint his wife while she wore clothes the two had purchased on their trips. We stare at a portrait in the impressionistic style of the widow wearing a red kimono, and you can almost make out her face. The nude figure in the proto-Cubist painting that's kept in the basement is a little more abstract, and so we now hold the frame on a shelf that hides the circuit box and its nest of snaked cables and wires. I have plans for these

leftover paintings for Craigslist, and I'm hoping to throw in a free set of miniature batiks of Mayan animal-gods if the buyer is interested in them.

There are two paintings I can't get rid of just yet, either because I like them or because they worry me. Both have the dead engineer's initials dotted onto their bottom right corners, and I like the man's choice of frames for them. Inside one of the dark wood rectangles is another portrait of the widow, in the Fauvist style this time, painted in profile. Set against a background of jaundice and mustard, the black and brown figure of a woman sits in a chair, her face turned out so we can see her sunken cheeks and her black eyes. She isn't smiling but instead seems carved from wormwood that's been washed and bleached on a shore. Her lips are the darkest wedge of color in the piece, and so that's where the eye draws to a point. This, I know, is the woman who sold us the house after her husband, the painter, died, and this is what she looks like in tragedy.

The second painting the dead engineer's wife leaves for us is a still-life of an empty room. The colors are mottled like that of an expressionist's palette, and it's all pinks and blacks and grays. The room in the painting features a workbench in the background below a window that's been fitted with bars, and there's a set of stairs on the right that lead up to the ceiling and nowhere else. The only light in the painting comes from the window, and then the stairs block it out almost entirely.

The woman's portrait is covering up an unused panel in our bedroom, back behind my dresser, and the painting of the door-less room props up next to a filing cabinet in my office. I don't think I can hang them without scaring our children, but, like the widow, I can't take them away from the house.

On July 16th, 1945, the Fat Man prototype, called 'The Gadget,' detonated at the Trinity site in New Mexico. Its slimmer, syringe-like counterpart, the 'Little Boy' series, had been ready since May, and both devices were waiting to be deployed by men who wanted specs of blast radii, graphs of post-detonation rad levels, lists of potential aircrafts in the Pacific theatre that could hoist and drop the bombs, and spreadsheets of potential targets, complete with all the data available. Three weeks later, the Enola Gay flew Little Boy to his new home and dropped him on the citizens and the newly mobile military divisions of Hiroshima, where his blast radius was said to have been 'inefficient,' burning and destroying only 30,000 people and injuring more than twice that amount.

Three days later, while the people of Hiroshima still burned, the crew of the Bockscar flew a ready-and-able Fat Man over the waters of Japan and dropped him onto the civilians of Nagasaki. Along with the destruction of the Mitsubishi plant

that had manufactured the bombs used at Pearl Harbor, the Fat Man immolated 70,000 Japanese. The immediate effects had been much more devastating, and so there were fewer survivors who would feel the effects past those initial days of the heat.

Back in the U.S., right after Japan surrendered, commanders at Oak Ridge and Los Alamos and Trinity and everywhere else connected to the Manhattan Project congratulated their staff on jobs well done, the engineer being among them. Their superiors told to continue their fine work as they readied an atomic arsenal that would hopefully never be needed. They were appreciated and applauded, and this was when the young, not-yet-dead engineer finished up his bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering, still in New Mexico, before leaving for home and a newfound sense of certainty in New York.

The dead engineer and his widow leave us their kitchen table, as well. It's a heavy thing, blocked for six people but extendable so that it can seat twelve. It is efficient and orderly, and its leaves can be switched out quickly, and this is why we keep it in the kitchen instead of putting it out for sale.

When my wife and children are asleep, I sit at the table like its former owners did. I grade papers and write letters, and I worry about the house and the future.

I imagine this is what the engineer did in the nights he lived here. I imagine he worried about the disorderly things in his life, what he could and couldn't control.

This is what I know:

I know that the engineer lost his first wife to a car accident. They were both young, but I'm not sure if there were children between them. I know there was a time when he was by himself in the house, before the widow married him.

I know the engineer stayed in contact with several of the other members of his Special Engineering Detachment in the Army, and that they visited Los Alamos again a few times over and beyond that first stint during the war. I know he lost friends and gave information for their obituaries.

I know the engineer became sick, like we all do, but that he was sick enough for a local hospice to come and feed him and keep him up on his medications, a task his wife couldn't perform because, like most hospice patients and their families know, there's just not enough energy to keep fighting sometimes.

I know the man died in his bedroom—our bedroom—just under the curve of our ceiling. I know this was where his wife kept their bed afterward, and it's where we keep ours now, but I haven't told my wife this just yet. I don't want her to worry.

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