

The House I Live In

The most important criterion for Lyn and me when we bought our house was that it be in an integrated neighborhood. So our options were limited to a half-dozen communities.

How could our choice for a community be otherwise? Kori needed to grow up seeing those who looked like her, had friends who resembled her and lived where she wouldn't feel like the odd person out.

Westbury village was our first choice and luckily for us, given my meager salary as the newly appointed Leader of the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island, we found a house we could afford, a red shingled, modified Cape, where the village meets New Cassel, across the street from a car repair shop run by a Cuban cigar smoker and his son, Coco. The paneled living room and cozy feel of the house won us over. Summer brought two unexpected delights, a sour cherry tree and a mimosa with pink flowers.

What couldn't be anticipated in 1969 was the white flight ready to take wing. Within a few years after moving to Westbury, many white families left—for better schools, those with children said, or because of declining property values, the less idealistic admitted.

Closer to the truth, I think, was this: they didn't want to be a racial minority in their community. As Lyn and I had recently returned from two years in Kenya, such a prospect didn't much faze us. It had taken us time to get used to being amongst the few *wazungu*, the Swahili word for white people. Sometimes we mistook curious looks as hostile and farmers in town carrying machetes frightening. Although we could understand the feeling of wanting to run, we didn't have any sympathy for those doing so.

On our street were twelve houses, evenly divided between white and Black families. Our Jewish neighbors next door, the Cottins, were life-long lefties. Their closest friends, who visited often, were parents of one of the three civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi a few years before.

Lou, who, like me, had goatee, retained a radical spark. His column in *Newsday* promoted senior activism. Nikka was restrained but stern, devoted to gardens and literature, a proper retired schoolteacher.

Soon after we moved in our neighbors presented us with honey and a loaf of home-baked bread.

Nikka examined the portrait of a young cellist painted by our friend Paula that hung in our living room.

“Who's the girl?” she asked.

“I don't know,” Lyn said. “The artist has two daughters, but I think she used a model for this.”

Nikka stood back for a minute or two with her boney hands clasped in front of her. She took small steps back and forth as she gazed intently at the painting.

“Is your friend represented by a gallery?”

“No. She’s tried. But no one’s interested in representational paintings these days. It’s all abstract.”

Nikka looked at the painting for a few moments more, then walked away.

“I wish her well,” she said.

That year Paula developed ovarian cancer and died. Had Nikka intuited in the girl’s bowing the mournful instrument the secret Paula’s illness that she didn’t want to reveal to us?

In their backyard Lyn admired the blueberry bush and many plants Nikka had pinched from botanical gardens.

Nikka poured chamomile tea into a porcelain cup with painted roses. She stirred in a half-spoonful of sugar. If Lou drank tea, I was certain that he would have it as I did—no milk, no sugar, and strong. *Eturungi*, they called it in Kenya. Strong tea.

That afternoon I had a beer and Lyn a Coke.

“Mrs. Lowenstein just disappeared,” Lou said as he swirled ice around with his Scotch.

“Who?”

“The Lowensteins. They lived in your house before the Wilsons,” Nikka said.

“Lowenstein was a real loner,” Lou continued. “He lived next door for ten years, but I never knew what he did. He’d come and go. Walk to the station. I would offer him a lift and he’d wave me off. Take the same train to the city. Never said a word.”

Nikka added, “I barely spoke to her. But I would occasionally see her in her backyard. It took an entire summer for me to realize that she was gone.”

“Died?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know,” Lou said.

Nikka gave him a sideways glance, a gesture I soon came to know as one of the tics of their relationship. Lyn and I weren't married long enough to have developed our own yet.

As our son Eric tore off the paper from the gift they brought, toddler Kori wobbled over to him to look. Our children examined the illustrated book, *The Story of Ferdinand*, the bull who refused to fight.

"Have you been to the attic?" Lou asked.

"We don't have an attic."

"Your house—four of them in a row—mine, they're all the same."

"You have a basement. We don't."

"Yeah, they're each a little different. But they all have attics."

Nikka took the children to the kitchen to read to them.

"I think she's up there."

Lou smiled, knocked the dottle from his pipe into his palm and dropped it into an ashtray. He ran a pipe cleaner through the stem of the much-chewed mouthpiece.

Lyn left for the kitchen.

"Gone, like that," Lou said, rubbing his beard.

Lyn and I understood going "just like that." We were ready to kidnap our own daughter and flee to Canada if the judge ruled that we weren't fit parents and demanded that she be returned to the agency before the adoption was finalized.

I think Nikka and Lou would have approved, if it came to that. Breaking the law for a good cause was a noble deed. For Lou: justice. For Nikka: love.

Whatever thoughts we had about running away we kept to ourselves. Kori was our daughter as much as Eric was our son, but she wasn't yet legally ours. Not until the end of a year's probation when a Family Court judge ruled it final.

Was there anything we had done to make the agency question us? Home visits by the social worker had gone well, as far as we knew, but we never got to see her reports. Kori was cheerful, loving, as always. Clearly, she was well-fed and groomed. She and Eric played well together. We were the model of a happy middle-class family.

The day the four of us went to court, I wore a jacket and tie, Lyn a dress, Eric in a handmade dashiki and Kori a white dress with a large red ribbon tied in her halo of hair.

Lyn grasped Eric's hand tightly. I held Kori closely against me. When Lyn took her from me, Kori began to giggle.

We didn't know what the judge thought as he flipped through the dossier in front of him. Did he see Peace Corps Volunteers as positive or negative? The agency didn't have a problem, so why would he? Did he approve of my anti-war activities or were we with our longish hair troublemakers? What about the Ethical Society? Were we fit to raise a child without a belief in God?

Our beige VW Squareback with a full tank of gas was outside. We had mapped the route north.

"I've read the report."

The judge looked directly at us and smiled.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Dobrin, you have a new daughter. And you, Eric, have a sister."

"Thank you judge."

But that had been true for a year already.



One day Lou told me that he had been jailed in New Jersey.

"A war for profit-hungry industrialists, nothing to do with labor's interests." He railed against the war as if were yesterday. He

took his pipe out of his shirt pocket. “It’s always the same—imperialism, corporate interests, beating the crap out of workers.”

Lou had supported two wars: The Republicans’ against Franco, in Spain, and the Allies’ against the Fascists, although I suppose he favored that war only after Germany launched its attack against the Soviet Union.

From his anecdote about his jail time during the First World War as a youngster, Lou segued into, “You know, Vance Wilson is a retired military guy. A pilot.”

I thought it ironic buying a house from a career soldier, a man of uniforms, discipline, rules and regulations. I had hated every minute I spent in the Army Reserves. Maybe if I had known that Wilson was a career soldier, it would have tainted my view of the house on the maple-lined street and we wouldn’t have found it charming.

“His wife once asked if we wanted them to get us some things from the commissary at Mitchel Field. Her offer offended Nikka. We had no right to take advantage. A nice guy, Van, though, and she was nice, too.”

“What about their kids?”

“That’s a mystery. None, I think. I’m not sure. But they often seemed to have a kid there.”

Lou opened a pouch of tobacco, packed the bowl, lit it and threw the wooden match on the grass.

“What do you think that was about?”

Lou raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

“He asked if I needed any fixing around the house. I wouldn’t let him do it.”

“My house was in great shape,” I said, thinking about the one tool my father, a life-long apartment dweller, owned—a heavy claw-

hammer I inherited from him when my parents retired to Florida. I was glad I didn't need to use it.

"Shovel my car out after a snow. Never asked if I needed it and didn't expect anything in return. Although I once gave him a box of cigars. A career officer. Major or something."

"They moved to Arizona, right? That's what I thought he said at the closing."

"I don't know. He never talked about himself. Only thing I know about him is he was a pilot and flew missions over Europe."

If Lou knew that Van was a fighter pilot who earned his medals in Burma and Korea, not Europe, he probably would have had a different opinion of his good neighbor.

And if we knew that we were buying a house from a career soldier, we may have had second thoughts.



Van Wilson said he had been born in the seat of a bi-plane, the one his father flew over Arkansas cotton fields. Before he could read, he knew the all the functions of the plane, every fold in the fabric covering, the smell of hangar grease and gasoline.

His earliest memory was standing as a boundary marker for a flyby of insecticide spraying, thrilled to stand erect as the plane's wings seemed to nearly brush against him.

He hated school and was glad when he was suspended. He agreed with the governor who thought that high schools were a waste of money. Only with Kate's help did he manage to pass his English class. He didn't like her more than that. She wasn't pretty enough for him. She was too smart.

When she told him she was pregnant, he promised to marry her but not yet. But when she miscarried, he told her he would keep

his word. Until that moment had he thought that nothing mattered more than flying but now he found that honor did.

When Van learned about the aviation program at Arkansas State, he left home for Jonesboro, vowing once again that he would marry Kate, after his graduation, in two years.

The attack on Pearl Harbor upended the plan. Instead of returning to marry Kate, he enlisted in the Army to join the Aviation Cadet Training Program.

“I’ll write,” he told Kate before leaving for Alabama. And every week she did receive a letter from him, always ending, “Say hello to Mom for me.”

At each stage of training, cadets washed out, sent to the infantry or trained to become navigators or bombardiers, possibilities that were no more exciting than school. Van doubled down. No more jokes, no more pranks, only study and discipline. Aircraft and ship identification, the mechanics of internal combustion engines, codes, weather maps, aerodynamics—Van thrived on it all.

Dear Kate,

Yesterday I received my final enlisted pay of \$97.25. I am no longer a Cadet. Don’t worry. I didn’t wash out. I completed the program. Today I was sworn in as an officer. I am 2nd Lt. Vance Wilson USAAF. I got my silver pilot’s wings and butter bar. An officer and a gentleman. I wanted to come home before I got my duty assignment. But I’m being shipped out in a few days. I think I am going to New York.

Say hello to Mom.

Van’s assignment at Mitchel Field, on the old Westbury common grazing ground, focused on training in combat planes until

deployed overseas. For several weeks, three to four hours each morning, he flew a Thunderbolt, the model he would use in action.

Passes were scarce, as everyone had to stand alert. For fliers, after morning flights, the rest of the day stared at them like an unwelcome void. So Van and other fliers changed into their first-class uniforms and took the railroad to Manhattan. No one seemed to care, until MPs called to break up a fight at the service club discovered they lacked base passes.

Van stood in front of his commanding officer, fearful that having been AWOL would keep him from the front. The CO ended the reprimand with a warning but no punishment. The need for combat pilots was too great for the government to lose someone who had come so far. Besides, the air corps wanted men who took calculated chances.

Before shipping out, Van returned to Arkansas on a two-week pass.

“We’ve talked about getting married, Kate. I promised you. But I’m going to war soon. It’s not fair to keep you waiting. You know that many boys don’t come back at all.”

Kate burst into tears.

“That’s why I think we should get married now,” he said. “And you at Teachers College, our kids will need to have one real educated parent, not an air jockey like me.”

The next day, with their families present at the Baptist church, they married.

Van’s first letter as a husband was written on a transport ship as it passed through New York Harbor, arriving one month after it was dated.

Dear Kate,
Our planes were loaded onto a boat that I am
sailing on. [REDACTED] At last I am going

to fight the Nazis. [REDACTED] We
are equipped with our winter gear.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
There was a surprise for me. When I opened my
sealed orders, I found that we weren't going to
England [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
You got to love the Army!
God knows what waits for us.
Love and kisses and say hello to Mom

Van spent the war flying from an airfield cleared in a tea garden high in a mountain valley between Burma and China. He continued to write, mostly about the pastimes at the base, especially pleased with having learned tennis and gotten a motorcycle from the British motor pool.

“Not as nice as airplane grease,” he wrote about the aroma of curry in every village. His only complaint: “Damn snakes.”

In one letter he included a picture of himself in front of a signpost.

“Hairy ears,” he explained. “It’s what the engineers call themselves. They are the ones building the roads through jungles here.”

In another letter he said that he had received a combat medal but not the reason for it: having downed four Japanese planes. He never told Kate or anyone else about combat.

“I’m going to stay in the air force,” he told her when he finally arrived home. “I was born in a plane and I can’t live without one.”

“What about commercial flying? Your father can get you an in,” she said, referring to his father, now flying with Delta Airlines.

But there was something larger than that. The military gave him a purpose.

“I really can’t describe it, Kate. People living in the streets, children without clothes. So little to eat.”

“It was war. I’ve seen pictures.”

“No. This wasn’t because of war. There was no fighting there. It was poverty grinding people down. But something hurt me even more, Kate. Even more than that.”

Van couldn’t say anything right then.

“But it isn’t only India, Kate,” he said one Sunday after church. “Do you remember that picture I sent of me in front of the Hairy Ears sign? Most of them, the workers, were Negroes. We drank beer and slept on beds and flew our missions, but these guys, they pulled hard all the time. Seven days a week, at night, in the monsoons. Nothing ever stopped them.”

Van’s distress took Kate aback. She looked at him, not knowing what to expect.

“They were on the ship with us when we left New York. But I didn’t know that until I met one Negro from Little Rock. Earl Wilson. A private. I never saw them, the Negroes. Not until we were in Burma. They were in the bilge. They slept down there with the rats. They showered with sea water.” He stopped to look at Kate directly. “In India, many of us treated them worse than hands in cotton fields. Like coolies, simply pack animals building a road to China.”

He told Kate he wanted to make life better for Negroes in the military.

“It’s not right.”

With the GI Bill, Van completed a college degree.

President Truman’s order to abolish racial discrimination in the armed forces encouraged Van to speak up in its support, a position that left him at odds with other officers who resisted equal treatment of Black airmen.

When the war erupted in Korea, Van told Kate, “I’m petitioning for a post in Korea.” They moved to Nevada where he received training on the Sabre jet fighter.

Kate had accepted her life as an officer’s wife, a tumbleweed shifting from base to base. They both expected, though, that they would live out their lives in peacetime. *Si vis pacem, para bellum*, Van would often quote. If you want peace, prepare for war.

Van didn’t think of himself as a warrior but a peace maker. “Peace is my profession,” he would say. He had no desire to fight another war but to prevent one through strength. But the Cold War had become hot with the communist invasion of South Korea, and he was ready to use that strength to save the free world.

What he didn’t tell Kate was that he also wanted one more down of an enemy plane to earn the title of Ace.

One morning after descending from the blue cold, Van’s F-86 approached the airfield. He had pushed past the minimum fuel required to return safely, with his pursuit of a North Korean MiG to the Chinese border. With the engine turned off to conserve fuel for a safe landing, he glided 70 miles sealed in the cockpit that felt like a second skin, floating over the mountains below him. His attempt to restart the engine failed as the airfield came into view. He tried again. Failure. Van prepared for another dead-stick landing.

Once again, he hadn’t encountered an enemy plane in a dogfight. While he chafed at the restriction placed on the sorties not to cross the Yalu River, the border separating Korea from China, he abided by it.

The day that Van peeled off to return to base, two others in the squadron had crossed the Yalu in pursuit of MiGs. Orders from Washington were one thing—political. The reality of combat something else. They weren’t going to have their tails twisted.

The pilots gathered in the debriefing room when all the planes returned. They reported on the day's operation, smoked and joked, when the base general, who rarely attended the debriefings, angrily walked into the room.

"Your flights were tracked by our radar. Sullivan. McDonald," the general reprimanded. "I won't tolerate insubordination."

He reminded them that disobeying these orders was a court-martial offense. He stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The fliers returned to their reports when the door opened again.

The general stood in the doorway until the men turned towards him. He added, "What's more, if you *are* going to violate the Manchurian border, shut off your goddamn IFF."

From then on fliers didn't turn on their friend-or-foe systems to prevent identification as they crossed into Manchuria. When they landed, the pilots also made sure that the footage from cameras triggered by the firing of the planes' machine guns were lost. Tampering with evidence was criminal, Van knew, but he kept his opinion to himself.

While others continued to engage the enemy in aerial combat by flying beyond the Yalu, Van contented himself with protecting bombers on their runs over North Korean cities. He returned stateside one kill short of becoming an Ace. He knew that his promotions in the Air Force were now limited.

Van's final posting before retirement brought him to Mitchel Air Force Base once again. More than any other assignment, Kate liked Long Island, its beaches in summer and the autumn foliage. Upon leaving the Air Force they bought a home for the first time, a tidy, shingled house on a street lined with Norway maples, not far from the base.

During his career in the military, Van had escaped injury. Now, during their first Christmas as civilians, the Wilsons were patients at Nassau Hospital. While driving to the Mitchel Field commissary, Van had turned to look at carolers at the train station. He applied his brakes too hard and the car slid sideways on black ice, jumped the curb and struck a utility pole, banging Van's head against the steering wheel; Kate's scalp was covered with shards of windshield glass.

After their release, stitched and bandaged, they sought out the singers who had ministered to them while awaiting an ambulance. The singers, they learned, were volunteers from Neighborhood House, a charity devoted to Westbury families in need.

With the return of milder temperatures, three days a week Van and Kate walked to Neighborhood House, a wooden building with a broad porch that was once a lawyer's home. Kate sorted and distributed clothing and food, much of which had been donated by wealthy families from the nearby estates, while Van repaired the aging building and during the summer helped with the day camp.



Neighborhood House (undated, Westbury Times)

“The Catholics are starting a new program at St. Brigid,” said Grace Underhill, a doyen in charge. The elderly woman with thinning hair held a miniature dog under her arm. She handed a neatly tied bundle of dresses and shirts to a woman standing in front of her with a child.

“To take care of children,” she continued to explain to the other volunteers. “They say that a home is better than an orphanage. I know how important a home can be. During the war, several soldiers stayed with us before going overseas. It made a world of difference to them to have a good bed and hot meals.”

Kate asked for more information about the program, but Underhill didn’t have anything to add. She began to reminisce about her idyllic childhood living on a 100-acre farm with horses and cattle.

The Wilsons had accepted that they would not have children of their own, so the program at St. Brigid appealed to them. They could take an older child until she was permanently placed in an adoptive home. Though called ‘foster parents,’ a term new to them, they would be more like an uncle and aunt.

“Which parish do you belong to?” Father Andrew asked during the interview.

“We’re not Catholic,” Kate responded.

“We’ve been attending the Methodist church,” Van answered. “On Asbury Avenue.”

“Yes. I know where it is.”

He held out the candy dish towards the Wilsons and put a mint in his mouth.

“I’m sure you would make a good home, but you see, our girls are Catholic. We place them only in Catholic homes.”

“We are good Christians.”

“No doubt you think so,” the priest said. “Nevertheless, it’s not possible.”

Kate and Van left disappointed but resolved that they would give themselves to a child in need, provide something more than smiles and a coat that they handed out at Neighborhood House.

“I’ve faced more difficult challenges,” Van said.

But he hadn’t expected Kate’s response.

“If we have to be Catholic, we’ll become Catholic,” she said.

Van laughed. In his Arkansas church, Catholicism was called a satanic tyranny over the souls of men.

“My father said the pope was the Anti-Christ,” Kate said. “But you don’t believe that any longer, do you?”

“No. But I can no more see converting to being Catholic than I can becoming a Jew.”

“It’s what’s in the heart that matters. There’s a child who needs us whose heart needs healing.”

“We’re not the only ones in the world with a home, you know.”

Kate dropped the subject, then returned to it months later.

“I can’t stop thinking about those girls. I was thinking that we could go to mass at St. Brigid. We would just go, not convert, and no one would ask us.”

“You would take communion in a Catholic church?”

“I’m a Christian. We’ve been baptized. What else matters?”

“That’s not right, Kate. It’s a lie and in a church on top of it.”

“It’s not a lie if we don’t say we’re Catholics.”

“You’re cutting too thin a line. It would be a sin.”

“I don’t think so. A sin is not giving a poor child a good home. Do you think there’s a better home than ours?”

“As good, maybe.”

“And if those good homes don’t open their doors to them? Then?”

They began attending Sunday services at St. Brigid. At some point they thought of themselves as congregants, no different than others taking communion.

Just as they had volunteered at Neighborhood House, they lent their hands to the church’s charity work. Within two years, they applied to become foster parents. They had no qualms presenting themselves as Catholics. When asked about their home parish, Van answered that was long ago, in Arkansas.

“We lived on a dozen air bases,” Kate explained. “We attended many churches.”

By the time they retired to Arizona because of Van’s arthritis, the Wilsons had fostered three girls.

Kate was right, Van agreed: no one could have given them a better home.



One night, several years after Lyn and I moved into our home, we heard scratching in our bedroom wall. I got out of bed. As I walked towards the noise the scratching stopped. This continued intermittently for several weeks.

“I bet it’s a mouse,” Lyn said.

“Why would it be in the wall?”

But there was no better explanation, so we called an exterminator who placed traps: in the pantry, behind the boiler, refrigerator and stove; he put poison around the perimeter of the house, but the noise didn’t abate. Every few months the scratching returned, always in the middle of the night, always going silent as I approached the wall.

Perhaps it wasn't mice.

"Could be a squirrel. Maybe a raccoon," a friend offered.

"How do we deal with that?"

"Steve's Wildlife."

Steve arrived in a van filled with small cages and other gear.

"We need to get into the attic," the trapper said. "Whatever it is, it's probably built a nest up there."

"We don't have an attic," I said.

"Yes, you do. I could see that from the street. What you *don't* have is a door to get into the attic. Look, if you don't get rid of it, it will just eat through your walls. Not a good thing. Let me take a look."

He came upstairs and walked from room to room.

"I think the trapdoor's here," he said, poking a tile on the ceiling in our children's room with a ruler. "I have to remove the tile. OK?"

"Go ahead," I said.

Steve uncovered an attic door, pushed it open and hoisted himself into the dark space.

"Nothing here," he said.

"But we hear something."

"I'm telling you, if there was an animal up here, I'd know it. They leave a urine trail or gnawed wood. Something. There's no animal up there."

"Then what can it be?"

Steve shrugged.

That night was Kori's last in the bedroom. For the next several days, she slept with Lyn and me, until we could get a bed for the spare bedroom. Something, after all, was up there and now it had a way to get out. One of the children's favorite books, *Where the Wild Things Are*, didn't help assuage her fears. Because Eric found

it more fun than scary, he stayed in the room, having the bunk bed all to himself.

What was in the attic? Mrs. Lowenstein, perhaps? I pulled the trapdoor open, stood on a stepladder and peered into the unfinished room. I shined the flashlight into corners, up and down rafters, across the floor. There! A steamer trunk next to the chimney. I crawled on a beam, grabbed the trunk, slid it to the trapdoor and lowered it into the room.

In the trunk was a photo of Major Wilson in the cockpit of an F-86 Sabre, his thumb raised after a successful dead-stick landing in Korea.

In the trunk were also letters from Kate and several loose-leaf books, a diary Van had kept since he first learned to fly. I didn't untie the ribbon on Kate's letters; I wouldn't violate her privacy. But I couldn't help reading Van's diary.

Every once in a while, the scratching returns. I don't call the wildlife service. Instead, I press my ear against the wall hoping it will lead to another story.