

How can we all be so close, and yet so far?

by Luis Humberto Crosthwaite

When was the last time you greeted your neighbor?

I'm talking about that person who lives in front or next to your house. That family with whom you have contact once in a while. That recognizable face who shops at the same supermarket.

What's the name of that old lady you see every Saturday in the park, where you take your kids to play?

Where does that lone man who lives around the corner work?

Sometimes we protect our privacy so much that we forget to see the world around us. Our house is an impregnable fortress, closed to outsiders, even to those who live a few steps from us.

I remember how in old television series, neighbors would greet the new family in the neighborhood. A couple would knock at the door with some sort of offering - a cake, perhaps. Did those times really exist?

Everyone knew Larry Euglon; after all, he had lived at the same address in Beaumont, Texas, for more than 20 years.

His neighbors would see him leave his house every day on his way to work.

They knew his name. They knew him: He was that divorced black man, 51 years old, who preferred to be left alone.

But then catastrophe came. In September 2005, Hurricane Rita's fury pounded the Gulf Coast, causing panic and mayhem. Most of the inhabitants of this area fled their homes.

When they were finally able to return, Larry's neighbors concentrated on repairing their homes, rebuilding their lives. Nobody had time to think about him. As time went by, his neighbors grew annoyed that Larry didn't return to clean and repair his property. The house was in disrepair, the garden grown over, full of dried

weeds, and the branches of a tree were still on the ground.

Along with the trash, the bills piled up, gas and electricity were shut off. Taxes went unpaid, and the city finally declared the house abandoned and put it up for sale.

It was a man interested in buying it who finally found Larry's mummified body in the bedroom, still dressed and lying on the bed.

None of his neighbors knows exactly when Larry Euglon died. It had been 18 months since anyone had seen him alive.

The last day of his life, Larry set his dining room table with nice china plates, wine glasses and table mats. Was he expecting visitors? Were his visitors late? Did he grow tired of waiting and decide to rest?

Through an autopsy, we might find some answers. We might learn that he died of natural causes, maybe a heart attack.

Other than that, we will never know what really ended his life. Was it Hurricane Rita blasting away at his neighborhood? Was it a broken heart or his own self-inflicted loneliness?

We'll never know. His house, like those of his neighbors and many of us, was an impregnable fortress.

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