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Why We Do These Things

Head-lolling, asking for a beer, on the living room couch, he sat. We had been in the kitchen quarreling over budget items when he had entered the apartment. There was nothing extraordinary about his appearance: he wore jeans, a white tee-shirt, and a flat-brimmed ball cap worn off-center over a blue bandana. He was drunk. Never having seen him before, we assumed that he had come to see our roommates.

We asked his name (Cooper), if he wanted the TV on (sure he did), if there was a specific channel we could turn to (could he have the remote?), after handing him the remote, if there was anything he needed (there wasn’t). Out of questions, we told him his friends wouldn’t be back for a while, and we returned to argue over our allotment for eating out over the next twelve months.

After an hour more deciding how to allocate our limited funds, we checked on our guest: he had nearly lain down, slouching so far down on the couch, but he seemed fine, perhaps even sobering up. Jackie reminded him that Josh and Amy Rosa would not be back for another two or so hours in case he hadn’t heard the first time. They had gone to enjoy a play at the Walnut Street Theatre.

“Who’s Josh and Amy Rosa? I thought this was Johnson’s spot?” He struggled to put the information together.

“I don’t know any Johnson,” my wife said. She looked to me, and I shrugged. In silence a few minutes later, Cooper left. We haven’t seen him since. This was our first Saturday night in the city, and after that night, we kept the door locked.
Jackie and I had moved in with Josh and Amy Rosa in order to save money. We were two married couples stuffed into two bedrooms, one bathroom, a living room and kitchen. Josh and Amy Rosa were religious. Jackie and I kept to ourselves.

We all worked at community development centers, Jackie and I at Promised Land CDC, Josh and Amy Rosa at Parkland West. Before coming to the city, our centers helped us to find each other and a place to stay near our workplaces in the north section of town. Josh and Amy Rosa had been in the city for a few years already. Finding positions for both of us had been fairly easy. Most people working at CDC’s stayed in their positions no longer than a year. Developing the communities and helping out the poor were things we each had our reasons for doing. But the question, ‘What are you here for?’ always seemed inappropriate to ask.

Living with another couple changed many things about our marriage. Quarrelling, for one thing, became more humorous, ending in laughter instead of pride.

Instead of the roaring mess we had made in our months-long fight over wedding rings (a fight I won, ensuring that we wouldn’t need to uselessly wear metal on our fingers), our first fight in the new place was quite docile. So that Josh and Amy Rosa wouldn’t hear from the kitchen, Jackie whispered, “You cheating, lying prick. You promised to stick to the budget. But you go ahead and buy a basketball to play after work. You know you won’t stick to exercising. It will be too cold to play outside in a month anyway. I never knew you to be so selfish. You are…” She picked up a picture frame from the coffee table and wound up to throw. Then she looked at the picture, saw Josh and Amy Rosa, and placed the frame back on the table. She stomped to the bedroom, disgusted. I laughed at her consideration for our roommates’ possessions.

Sex was another activity affected by our roommates. Of course, we could only budget three condoms a week to ensure that we could get each other Christmas and birthday gifts. But still, we were restricted. We had to worry about noise and where Josh and Amy Rosa were. There would be no yellow, 70’s style couch and recliner in the living room in our future, no kitchen table, no
walking naked to the kitchen for a beer or for chips or for pickles. Jackie loved pickles.

That was a benefit, though: Amy Rosa loved to cook. She served all sorts of dishes: Italian, Puerto Rican, beef, turkey, casseroles. She even boiled down store bought apples to make her own applesauce and pickled cucumbers. Jackie raved. Often, Amy Rosa would cook on Sundays after returning from their church, and we’d eat leftovers for dinner at least until Tuesday. In my mind, despite the required contribution to the supper fund, this at least balanced things out.

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Our first slashed tire came in our third week. I had expected a flat tire first because of all the glass.

Pulling up to the apartment on move-in day, we had noticed that both adults and children walked in the street. Hanging out of the driver’s side window, one hand on the wheel, I had yelled, “Use the sidewalks!” That was to the fourth group that forced us to come nearly to a stop to allow everyone to move in between parked cars. Each group watched us like blind men and women, tracking the sound of the passing car, eyes recognizing and alighting on nothing. Even after my command, they refused to respond either with words or gestures or movement to the sidewalks. Driving two blocks, I leaned toward Jackie and said, “That’s why we’re here; someone’s got to teach them what sidewalks are for.”

Three days later, we were walking in the evening after our first day on the job to the only corner store in our neighborhood. The store was four blocks west on Chestnut Avenue, a single lane, one-way street. Josh and Amy Rosa asked us to pick up some milk and some honey-roasted peanuts for them. They had been asked to bring snacks for their bible study group that night. Jackie was describing a conversation that she had with her training supervisor earlier in the day. We had only walked one block.

“Can you believe she said that to me?” she said.

I couldn’t.

“Then, she was like, ‘If you don’t reject a certain amount of applications, we’ll be required to terminate your employment.’ The nerve. On the first day!”
“Where did all this glass come from?” I asked her. The sidewalk alternated stretches of broken glass and clean spaces. Our feet ground particles of broken glass ever finer, filling the cracks in the undulating slabs with their dust. I had never noticed on the walk from the car to the rowhouse steps. There were many places where we could avoid stepping on blatant broken bottles. But there seemed always to be that crunch.

“I don’t know; let’s walk in the street.” She picked up her lament as we cut between two parked cars and walked in the street. “The way she spoke was so annoying, too. She raised her pitch at the end of every sentence. You know what I’m talking about.” She demonstrated, “I have rich parents; I’ve never worked for a thing in my life; and I am always right! Like, ya know.” She stopped. “Isn’t that annoying?”

Terribly.

A black Cadillac turned down Chestnut and sped past, forcing Jackie and I up against a parked sedan. I gestured and yelled, “Hey! I’m walking here!”

The driver gestured back and applied the brakes to lean out the window. “Use the sidewalk, n—!”

“Can you believe him?” Jackie said. “Calling a white man a….”

I figured with all the glass on the sidewalks, our ’95 rusting station wagon would have a punctured tire before anyone ever slashed my tires. But a few weeks later, we found our vehicle deflated and torn looking the way we’d imagine a depressed car might look. That morning, Jackie rode to work with Josh and Amy Rosa, and I waited for the tow truck, losing a few days’ pay: one for missing a day of work, several for having to pay for a tow truck and new tires.

When the tow truck arrived, I steered the car up onto the truck’s bed. While the driver secured the car, I told him I didn’t think I’d upset anyone and asked if this happened often. His name was Ed, a name you’d expect from a tow truck driver.

“More often than people’d like, I think,” he said. “And you don’t have to piss any body off to get your tires sliced.”

He waited for me to ask why.
He stood up (he had been adjusting straps on one of the front tires), sniffed, and rubbed his nose with his wrist to avoid his greasy hands. “Sometimes they do it because they are pissed off. But sometimes I don’t think they know why they do it. Sometimes they just need to even the playing field, I think.”

“And who are ‘they’?”

“Could be anybody, I think,” said Ed, moving around to the other side of the car on top of the truck’s bed. “Could have been me. Could have been you.”

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When it turned cold (I had given up basketball for three weeks before that point), Promised Land flooded with frigid mothers and grandmothers, children in tow. They all wanted assistance in heating their homes. We had a chart for that. We had a chart for everything. And we had a pamphlet for every chart. And each pamphlet was labeled with a deceiving, obscure name. Our home heating assistance program was under the label ‘Weatherization.’

Charts generally looked more like lists with gridlines around the words than actual charts. So much income was allowed for so many people in one household to receive assistance. One dollar more and the whole household was disqualified. Our weatherization program chart listed each category: one person family size, $15,535; two people, $22,395; three people, $26,199… Of course, after qualification, the process began with a twelve month examination of heating bills, diagnostic testing, and eventually help in making the home more energy efficient. Explaining to the many women that shuffled through the door that we were not offering subsidies or any cash reimbursement to help them was not an easy task, but I grew accustomed to it. Blunt was best.

We had similar charts for every type of assistance and development project. Did the community have this demographic? Did the community show substantial need? “Substantial need” had a definition in a different pamphlet, the pamphlet of “Definitions and FAQ’s.” Any questions that the definitions pamphlet failed to answer were to be directed to any of Promised Land’s consultants. My desk was closest to the wall of pamphlets in the lobby.
We dealt with people of all shapes, colors, sizes, and mental capacities, and because of this, more than one fight broke out between families. Still, they were people; they had stories. Their stories seemed to always sound like our own: They had dreams for the future, to get out of the city; they had children with dreams, to get out of the city; they just needed a boost at that time, just a boost, and maybe that time would be their time, to get out of the city. We were their opportunity.

One day, shortly after every mother and grandmother in the area had learned that we weren’t going to pay for their heating bills, I worked with Javier, father of two and husband. He had a mocha complexion and a black rectangle of a mustache over the flat line that made his mouth. He was looking for a low interest loan to buy a vacant lot on Allegheny Street, to build a discount grocery store there. He was doing it for his daughters, he said. I began walking him through the loan application process and mentioned the possibility of a state grant. He would need a business plan and pro forma financial projections. These were ways for us to gauge our clients’ commitment level and probability of (Promised Land’s mantra) “successful and sustainable development within the community.”

While handing him some worksheets to help him construct his business plan, a woman in jeans, a heavy coat, and carrying a dull orange-pink handbag, a kerchief holding back her hair, walked into the lobby and began to yell. “Javier, que…” She took the small handbag she had been carrying and began to beat him over the head with it. He lifted his fat hands half-heartedly to protect his head and excused himself.

I could hear them speaking loudly in Spanish outside on the building’s steps. Their voices grew louder as they opened the door and Javier came to pick up the worksheets I had been giving to him. The woman was swinging her handbag, the blows landing haphazard on his shoulders or back or head. He thanked me in English while leaving, pursued by the woman and her flailing bag.

That night I dreamed that I ate lunch with an African, an El Salvadorian, two straight up black men, and a Puerto Rican. We sat in a long booth in a diner on the east side.
“Ah em not black, eh,” the African said. “Ah em African.”
“You’re in America and you’re colored. You’re black,” said one of the black men.
I said, “Man, you can’t put a brother down, man. You just can’t.”
They looked down in silence.
The African said, “Whut do you mean?”
I shrugged. I said, “I don’t have a clue, ya know?”
“Yer damn right. Yer so stooipid.”
We ate our lunches. In their respective pockets, the African fingered a gospel, the Puerto Rican fingered a kilo, the El Salvadorian fingered the picture of a woman, and one of the black men fingered a gun. The other black man sang.
As we ate too small sandwiches, we all tried to talk at once. Each of us shouted louder than the man next to us. We all wanted to be heard. And though I was yelling too, they all looked at me when they spoke. We stopped when the waitress returned to collect our plates and deposited the bill on our table.
The El Salvadorian pointed at me, saying, “You’re paying.” They all muttered agreement.
I pulled out my wallet but found nothing in it. Some of them cursed. Then the black man pulled out his gun and pointed it at my chest.

* Late in the spring, we all stood outside at dusk. Leather, rubber, carpet, these seem to make the new car smell. Josh and I were trying to work the night vision feature in the new car. Jackie and I had a new car. Her uncle had bought us a BMW 760Li sedan, white, sun-roof, power windows and locks, satellite radio, the works. Her uncle owned a moderately successful software company; he believed in what we were doing. Josh kept ordering me around out in front of the car. Lift your hand, he’d say, and I’d lift it. Okay, he’d say, and I’d drop it. He told me to come take a look.
“It’s a blessing, man,” he said. He ran his hand along the waxed hood as he went a few paces in front of the car for me to look at his image on the night vision screen.
Two weeks earlier the station wagon had died overnight. Of course, we discovered it on a workday morning. I called Ed, he
towed it away, and we piled into Josh and Amy Rosa’s car for the next two weeks. Now, we would be free again.

Having no interest in working the night vision console, Jackie and Amy Rosa went inside. Josh lifted his hand. A group of the neighborhood guys moseyed down the street on their way back from who knows where. Jackson, an elderly black man, his gray curls claiming wisdom, led. He had been a janitor at the local high school before retiring, and he lived on Chestnut and Twelfth. With him were Jamal (he worked on the loading dock of JP and Sons’ Freight; he was twenty-eight), Free (his real name was Quenton; what he did, if anything, I never knew), E (short for Elijah; Jackson’s son; cook), and Marcus (he was a plumber, was married and had three children, two boys and a girl).

“Someone’s moving up in the world,” said Jackson. “Next thing he’ll be packing up and moving out. I seen it play out like that many times.” He nodded, knowing. “Which one of you owns this car?”

“I do,” I said, “and we’re going nowhere, Jackson. Don’t worry.”

“Suit yourself.”

The men marveled. They gasped. They pointed. They touched. They spoke:

“Free, you ever seen a car with no miles before?”

“I drive by them in that dealership parking lot, Harper’s, I think it’s called, every time I take a trip to the suburbs; just never touched one before.”

“This’ll keep the kitchen buzzing for a week.”

“The whole time, we was living by a rich man.”

“Always wanted a sunroof.”

“Brand new leather; I ain’t smelled that smell since the principal of the school gave me a ride home during a snow storm once.”

“I wouldn’t never want the kids to ride in it if I owned this car.”

“Look at this! A heat detector!”

“That’s that new night vision feature they got for pedestrians running at night.”

“He should put some nice rims on it.”
“Pop the hood, Marcus; let’s take a look”
They looked.
“Yup, clean as hell. No dirt, no grime.”
“In all my years, never known any one living round here who’d own something like this.”
One whistled.
“He’s blessed, isn’t he fellas?” Josh asked, butting into their examination.
“God damned blessed, for sure,” said Jackson.
After the men moved on toward Chestnut, Josh offered his thoughts on the car. It wasn’t an accurate representation of our situation. In an American town, he said, this car would not have been out of place. But we did not live in an American town.
What did he mean?
We lived in America sure, he explained, but we did not live in an American town. He said, we lived in a place ruled by prejudice, by unequal opportunity, by no opportunity. He said, here was not civilization; here was no pantry or refrigerator with food; here was no closet with fifteen outfits; here were empty cabinets demanding every member of the family to forage for paper money or coins; here were empty bureaus and children wearing second or third generation shirts and trousers begging ridicule from peers.
I smiled. I didn’t know what else he wanted me to do.
“I recommend you sell it and use the money to buy a junker, putting what’s left in the bank or the market.”
“Why do you say that?”
“They’ll be expecting help from us, now.”
“I already help them, don’t I?”
He nodded. “They’ll be looking for tangibles.” He rubbed two fingers against his thumb.
“They know we’re struggling just like they are.”
“You heard Jackson. The whole community will hear his side of the story.”
“I told them Jackie’s uncle gave the car to us as a gift.”
“No. No, you didn’t.”
I shook my head. “Don’t be stupid, it ain’t that big a deal.”
There was an awkward pause.
Josh looked at the sky, the way the dusk burned, clouds red and orange and purple. I said, “I’ma go see if supper is ready.” I left him standing with his hands on his hips in front of the new sedan.

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Over the course of the months we’d been in the city, visitors came only when we invited them. After the arrival of the car, E was first to come uninvited. I asked him to come in for a beer, and we watched the ball game for a few innings. He described his love of the game, how he wished he could have played high school ball, how he had to work instead, how he wanted to teach his children to play when he had them. Then he left. Marcus and Jamal each paid a visit and drank a beer. Jackie received visitors as well, Marcus’s wife among them. Jackie and I even began to meet Free whenever we stepped out to enjoy a walk on our lunch break in the warm weather. They all talked about bills, their families, what they wished they could have for dinner. We shared our ideas. We drove the new car.

Soon, our friends began to only recount their economic woes to us. It came to a head one night. We were reading in the bedroom and our roommates sat watching the TV in the living room. It wasn’t late, but it wasn’t early either. Someone knocked on the door; Josh opened it, and I could hear E’s voice.

“Jackie, James, could you come out here?”

We got out of bed and shuffled in shorts and tees into the living room. E sat with his elbows on his knees, his hands in the space between his legs as if holding something, maybe himself, together. He stared ahead over the coffee table and picture frames at the empty couch. When we had come in, he looked at all four of us in turn, brows furrowed.

“My father’s pension can’t cover his heart medications, and we don’t have insurance.” He waited for us to respond.

We said nothing.

“You probably live on very little yourselves,” he said, losing confidence in his story. “I understand if you can’t help us, but you’re the only ones I could think of who might have extra cash.”

We said we didn’t.
“Just twenty-five would pull us through.” He searched the carpet for a script. He looked at us and added, “Please.”

We said nothing.

It went on like this for about twenty minutes. Josh told him to come see him the next day. Then E left.

Josh turned to me after E shut the door. “I asked you to sell that car.” He’d seen this before, he said. Missionaries went through the same process and lost their entire ministry. “Please, just get rid of the car.”

In the days following, I never learned if E came to see Josh or what the outcome of that meeting was. I began to notice the different way people looked at us driving the new car along the familiar streets we’d turned in our minds into something of a home neighborhood. At once, there were the familiar faces we’d grown accustomed to, and there were the new expressions of aloofness or disgust. I didn’t mention this to Jackie.

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As summer was coming on, Josh and Amy Rosa decided to host one of their Bible study fellowship nights at the rowhouse.

“They’re eager to meet you,” Amy Rosa said. “We’ll only be enjoying some drinks and making conversation. You don’t have to worry about religion.” Jackie was enamored with the idea of spending time with our roommates and their friends who we saw little of and knew less. In the end, I acquiesced.

Josh and Amy Rosa’s study group consisted of two married couples (not including themselves), three single women, and two single men. They arrived within five minutes of each other in the after-dinner hour, each rapping at the door.

One of the single women was Julie Mattoras. She had come in a knee length skirt and a green t-shirt. She had made herself distinct from the others in the way she moved about the room, making anyone she came near tense. She carried a small accessory bag which she opened every five minutes to pull out a mirror and lipstick or to check her phone. She didn’t say much but laughed much too loud.

The TV was on, and one of the single men, slouching against the arm of the couch, watched a program about the nation’s freight
movements. It was humid, and I was sweating without even mov-
ing. Some from the group were playing cards at the kitchen table; Josh and Amy Rosa were discussing their work with several of their guests. Jackie had gone to the corner store on Chestnut to pick up ice for the drinks. I had taken a beer and stood in a cor-
ner from where I could both see and hear the freight program. I disliked functions like this, and I didn’t know why Jackie had so desired that we be there.

When I thought Jackie couldn’t take any longer in returning with the ice, Julie made her way from across the room to my cor-
ner and stood in front of me, blinking at me. I asked her how her evening was going.

“You might think I’m crazy,” she said, “but the Lord just told me that you are my husband.”

I laughed.

“I don’t think this is a laughing matter.”

I stopped.

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Did the Lord tell you I’m your wife?”

I told her I was married.

“God doesn’t lie. Plus, I’ve heard that excuse before. I see you’re not wearing a ring, so you can’t pull that.” She was serious. She raised her hand and waved her bag to get everyone’s attention. Everyone ignored her. She spoke loudly, “The Lord just spoke to me!” Everyone stopped, and freight trucks on the TV droned. They believed her.

“The Lord told me—” but she couldn’t finish because of the crash of glass and vulgar shout from outside on the street. The card game broke up with shrieks, and the whole group huddled in the living room, as far as they could get from the kitchen window.

Josh walked into the kitchen and picked up the brick that broke the window. He looked out the window, trying to see who had assaulted their apartment.

He said, “I think it’s time for everyone to go.” The group obeyed him silently. They each shook my hand and thanked Josh and Amy Rosa. They chuckled over their fear, and promised a bet-
After they left, Josh closed the door.

Jackie said, “The tires on our car have been slashed again, James.”

Josh said, “I asked you to get rid of the car; I said, It would only bring trouble; I said, this was not the place for such a car. Trade it in, I said.” He sighed and rubbed his face with his hand, sitting down on the couch. Amy Rosa began to sob. She went to the kitchen; we heard the crunch of glass. Then, we could hear her sweep and pick the broken glass off the floor.

I apologized for the mess.

Josh said, it was about time.

He eyed us from the couch. We listened to the tinkling sound of glass being brushed off of the countertops into the trash can.

“Amy Rosa and I discussed this,” he said. “If there were another incident, we said, you go or the car goes. I can’t have my wife or guests endangered because of your insensitivity. You can stay until you find another apartment if you choose to leave.” He got up and went to the kitchen to help Amy Rosa clean the mess.

A few weeks later, looking for a new apartment, we budgeted for a pair of wedding bands.