

My House, No Longer My Home

by Cheryl L. Rankin

A few months after my husband Ken and I married, I stepped out of our home in rural Maine to coax our Springer spaniel, Dixie, back indoors after giving her time to do her morning business. She was sniffing earnestly at the end of our driveway, unusual for our well-behaved dog to venture so close to the road. "You little stinker," I lovingly scolded as I approached to draw her back a safer distance. I stood in the early morning summer sun, staring in disbelief at the spray paint scarring the pavement. "KKK" and "n-i-g-g-" I couldn't finish; the disgusting words stabbed at my heart, and sucked my breath away. The soft cooing of mourning doves on our lawn, the collective beating of their wings in flight as Dixie approached them, and the drone of a nearby lawnmower were drowned out as disbelief consumed me.

Belinda, our neighbor, strolled down her driveway to put a letter in her mailbox. As usual, even on this Saturday morning, she was "gussied up" as my grandmother would say, in a dainty flowered dress, her light brown curls bouncing slightly as she walked. She noticed me standing motionless. Her heels clicked on the road as she crossed to stand next to me. Her green eyes followed mine, still fixed on the hateful graffiti. The smile on her bright pink lips disappeared. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed as

she hugged me. "How awful! You can't help it if you fell in love and married a black man! I'm so sorry."

The fleeting feeling of comfort from her hug evaporated with her words. I tried to find even a hint of sarcasm in them, hoping she meant them as a joke, however inappropriate, but her words rang as her truth. Was she deliberately trying to hurt me? Was I somehow over-reacting to her words? Regardless of what compelled her, the impact on me was a mixed feeling of betrayal and anger.

My eyes burned with tears. I brushed them away impatiently as my mind raced with unspoken thoughts. "Really, Belinda? You loved my ex-husband, a hopeless drunk who couldn't keep a job, and left the raising of our daughter up to me. You never had a bad thing to say about that blue-eyed loser. But I can't 'help it' that I married an intelligent, funny, kind, dependable Army vet with a master's degree, who is a respected assistant city manager? Just because his skin isn't white."

All I choked out to her was "Couldn't help it? Really? Like if I had any control over myself, I never would have chosen Ken for a husband?" I pushed her arms away, almost hoping for a look of shock on her face. She instead had a confused, pitying look as I walked away. How could she think she should pity me? Who else thought I had caved in to some unfortunate attraction?

My legs were shaking but at the same time felt like lead, as I made my way back down the driveway to my door. I was dizzy with a sick chill despite the warm sun, and the world around me seemed colorless. How could I tell Ken about this? How could we ever know which of our "friendly" neighbors felt compelled to share their beliefs using a can of ugly orange spray paint in the dead of night?

Was it Belinda or another of the church-going neighborhood PTA moms? Someone who had stood next to me at a school fundraiser, as we sold sundaes? Nooooooooo. Paula, who babysat my daughter after school, or her husband John, who worked with me at the university? Impossible! Could it be Belinda's husband Larry or one of the other neighbor dads who often played basketball with Ken in our back yard? Couldn't be! Maybe it was one of the kids who attended school with my daughter, rode bikes with her to the lake to go swimming, who shared birthday parties, and sleepovers? No way! Was it just one person out of our town of 500? Because I hadn't a hint that anyone felt that way, I couldn't rule any of them out. I hated being so suspicious; it hurt my heart to wonder about everyone because I couldn't identify the "someone."

Every ounce of contentment and good will that I had built over the past 12 years of living in our tiny town drained away. The

feeling of peace and belonging, and the tranquility of small-town living were shattered. The house I had helped to build with my own two hands, where I'd designed and enjoyed my dream kitchen, was suddenly only that -- a house, no longer a home.

As shattering as this experience was, it led Ken and me from rural Maine to Atlanta. It brought us to the "racist" South that my family was so concerned about; to where we've now happily lived and thrived in a diverse neighborhood for nearly 20 years. It allowed us to indulge our mutual love of travel, with trips to France, England, Germany, Mexico, Hawaii and countless other amazing places. If I saw Belinda today, I'd want her to know that Ken is still the love of my life, our marriage continues to be an adventure I never would have experienced were it not for him, and I'd choose him again as my husband in a heartbeat.