

Property Value

Thomas Fenton rocked back and forth in the thickly cushioned glider on his spacious, screened-in porch. The early morning air was crisp and cool. The sky was a bright, clear blue. Birds sang in the leafy oaks and maples that shaded his expansive, well-manicured lawn. Like tiny diamonds, dew adorned his roses. He could smell the flowers' fragrance.

Thomas had spent a fortune on his home since he and Mildred had purchased the place forty-odd years ago, improving the property value by renovating the existing rooms, adding new ones, and building this porch, which surrounded the entire house. He'd also spent thousands of dollars in landscaping the yard, adding flowers, shrubs, trees, fountains, statues, a koi pond, and even a sparkling waterfall. As a result, the appraiser had valued his property at \$250,000—a far cry from the \$45,000 that he'd paid for the place when he'd bought it.

That had been *before* his neighbors had let their houses go to hell. Frank Haskell, on his left, and Richard White, on his right, had bought their homes within five years of his purchase of his own property. Unlike Thomas, their fortunes had declined rather than risen over the years. As a result, they'd been barely able to make their mortgage payments. There'd been no renovations or additions or any other improvements to their properties. That would have been all right. Had they merely preserved the original condition of their houses, instead of letting them deteriorate, their properties wouldn't have detracted from the property value of Thomas' house. As it was, the appraiser had estimated that his property might fetch as much as another \$50,000 if his neighbors' properties had been kept up, the way they should have been.

Thomas glanced at Frank's place. He shuddered. The house was in desperate need of paint. The clapboard siding was peeling. Great strips of paint fluttered in the morning breeze, and Thomas could see more gray wood in many places than he could see white paint. The yard was virtually barren of shrubbery, flowers, or any other attempt to beautify the landscape. The roof, although intact and sound, was discolored from long-term weather effects, fallen leaves, and windblown dirt, dust, and grime.

Richard's place was just as bad, and maybe worse. The brick of which the house had been built—*ages ago*—was not only badly discolored in places, but it was also starting to crumble. The window frames were somewhat askew, due to long exposure to the temperature changes between winter and summer, Thomas suspected. Even one of the walls of the house was slightly bowed, because the foundation had shifted an inch or two over the past several decades. Like Frank's roof, Richard's, although sound, was also badly soiled from the elements. The paint on the shutters with which Richard's windows were equipped was badly faded and peeling. The porch sagged slightly. Although the yard was landscaped to some degree, little care had gone into weeding and mulching the few flowerbeds, and all the shrubs needed to be trimmed. What was worse, dandelions grew in Richard's yard! Thomas, who'd lavished hours and hours of time and thousands of dollars on his own perfect lawn, was terrified that, sooner or later, a windblown dandelion seed would drift onto his property and take root. Thereafter, Thomas would have to spend even more time and money in fighting the stubborn weed.

Thomas had, of course, complained about Frank's and Richard's properties. He'd expressed his displeasure to his wife, first of all, but Mildred, gentle soul that she was, had exhibited her usual cheerful compassion, suggesting that he was being too harsh on the kindhearted gentlemen who'd resided on either side of them for four decades. She was certain that Frank and Richard both would have better maintained their properties if they'd had the money to do so. It wasn't their fault that they'd suffered financial setbacks and hardships. Instead of voicing his displeasure concerning the condition of their houses, Thomas should be grateful that he'd been fortunate enough to have been able to maintain and improve his own property. After his airing of complaints about this topic had resulted in several arguments with Mildred, Thomas stopped raising the issue to her. More than anything, he'd brought the matter up to her out of frustration, anyway; Mildred couldn't do anything more about the problem than he could.

Next, Frank had lodged a formal complaint with the mayor. Now, he'd thought, he might actually get some action. After all, there were laws against not maintaining one's personal property, weren't there?

The answer to that question, Thomas had found, was “yes” and “no.” The mayor himself had assured Thomas that local ordinances prohibited residents from allowing their grass to grow longer than six inches. Homeowners couldn’t store inoperable vehicles on their property. Property owners couldn’t let junk or trash accumulate in their yards. Obviously, a house and any outbuildings had to be structurally sound. The problem was that neither Frank’s nor Richard’s properties had any of these problems.

“You mean my neighbors’ neglect of their homes can take \$50,000 off my property value and there’s nothing I can do about it?” Thomas had demanded.

“Based on what you’ve told me, there’s only one thing that you could do,” the mayor had replied.

“What’s that?”

“Help them paint their houses.”

Thomas hadn’t bothered to respond to the mayor’s suggestion. He’d slammed his telephone receiver down, frustrated and angry that he’d received no assistance from the local authorities to whom he’d paid taxes all his adult life.

That had been a year ago. Since then, nothing had changed, except for the worse. More of the paint on Frank’s clapboard house had peeled away, and more of the bricks of Richard’s house had crumbled. A few of the shrubs in Richard’s yard—and he had few enough, as it was—hadn’t come through the winter, but Richard, complaining of a bad back and heart problems, hadn’t bothered to dig them up and get rid of them. He’d left them in the ground, as another eyesore to decrease Thomas’ property value.

Once, during the many months that Thomas had complained to Mildred about his neighbors’ properties, before their discussion of Thomas’ favorite topic had degenerated into another argument, Mildred had suggested that Thomas discuss the matter with Frank and Richard.

“What good would that do?” Thomas had demanded. “They may listen, but they won’t hear a thing I have to say.”

“You don’t know that,” Mildred had charged.

“All right,” Thomas had retorted, “I’ll talk to them, but, mark my words, it will do no good.”

That weekend, Thomas had talked to both Frank and Richard. Paying a visit to their respective homes, which had been no mean feat in itself, Thomas had told them, bluntly, that the conditions of their properties were adversely affecting

his property value by \$50,000. “What are you going to do about it?” he’d demanded.

Frank had been apologetic. “I’m sorry, Thomas,” he’d answered, “but there’s nothing that I *can* do about it.” He and Edna had bought the house years ago, he’d said. They’d expected to improve the property, but they’d had a long series of financial reversals since then. He’d then bored Thomas with a long litany of the financial setbacks he’d encountered during the last decade. When the company for which he’d worked for fifteen years began downsizing, he’d been forced to accept an early retirement, which had reduced the amount of his pension by a substantial amount. His wife, Edna, had developed a rare medical condition that required a monthly prescription of \$300 pills. His heart medicine was another major expense. He’d lost a large portion of his retirement fund to stock market dives. Thomas had left as soon as he could. He hadn’t stopped by to hear a litany of excuses. He’d wanted action. Instead, all he’d received was one sad story after another. Thomas had no patience for anyone who couldn’t manage his financial affairs.

Richard hadn’t been at all apologetic when Thomas had visited him, announcing in a loud, challenging tone that Richard’s failure to maintain his property properly had caused an appraiser to value Thomas’ property at \$50,000 less than he would have if Frank and Richard had kept up their properties. Richard had told him to get the hell off his property and never to return. It had been after this run-in that Thomas had taken the matter to the mayor. Unfortunately, he’d obtained no more satisfaction from the mayor than he had from Frank or Richard.

It was unfair that he had to suffer because of *their* neglect of their properties! Thomas had worked hard, all his life, to pay for his home and the additions, improvements, and renovations that he’d made to the residence and for the flowers, shrubs, trees, koi pond, fountain, and waterfall he’d added to the yard. The lawn itself—threatened now by dandelions from the unsightly mess that was Richard’s yard—had cost Thomas a small fortune. It was true, perhaps, that Thomas had also been fortunate in many respects. He hadn’t been forced to accept an early retirement. As a civil servant, he’d never been laid off, and he’d received regular pay increases, even during lean years. The government had been very generous to him, both in the

salary and the fringe benefits he received. He and Mildred had avoided serious medical problems. Neither of them required expensive medication. They had a sizeable nest egg, and his retirement account, by and large, had weathered the stock market's fluctuations rather well. In addition, he'd received several hundred thousand dollars in an inheritance. Still, he had worked hard to pay off his house, to maintain it properly, and to improve it. He had every right to expect his neighbors to have done—and to do—the same.

It was true that these improvements to his house and yard, as well as time, had increased his property value from \$45,000 to \$250,000 in the forty-odd years he'd owned the place. However, more to the point, it was also true that his property would have been appraised as being worth \$300,000 had it not been for the eyesores in which Frank and Richard resided.

It was unfair, Thomas told himself for the thousandth time, that he should have to pay for their failures to maintain their properties! The injustice of the situation negated the pleasantries of the morning's breeze, the cloudless blue sky, the music of the birds twittering in the foliage of the green trees, and the glitter of the dew on his sweet-scented roses. Frank's and Richard's dilapidated properties took all the joy out of living.

If he'd lived in a just world, his neighbors' properties would be razed as uninhabitable eyesores!

If he'd lived in a universe ruled by a just God, lightning would have long ago burned Frank's clapboard monstrosity and Richard's brick perversion to the ground. Thomas sighed. The world wasn't just, anymore than God was. No one cared that Frank and Richard were costing him \$50,000.

He glanced again at the houses on either side of his own, trembling at the sight of them. He'd give anything if the hideous edifices would go up in flames!

“Ten thousand dollars. That's my price.”

Thomas glared at the short, thin, wizened man with the toothpick in his teeth. He didn't like the thin frame or the dry and withered, reptilian skin of the man who sat across the table from him in the diner's booth. He didn't like the oily, slicked-back hair. He didn't like the loud, colorful Hawaiian shirt. He didn't like the way that the other man wore dark

sunglasses indoors. Most of all, Thomas didn't like the price the man had just quoted to him. "Ten thousand dollars!" Thomas reiterated, outraged.

The shirt that the other man wore was a bright banana-yellow color, with pineapples, melon slices, and other fruits printed on it in garish colors. It made Thomas sick to look at it. It made him feel queasy. He felt as if he were having breakfast with a fruit salad—and one that was trying to cheat him, at that!

The man in the Hawaiian stared across the table as he slowly chewed a mouthful of scrambled eggs. When he'd swallowed, he said, "Each."

"*Each?*" Thomas leaned forward, his face red. "Ten thousand dollars *each?* That's absurd! That's robbery!"

The other man sprinkled more pepper onto his eggs. He sipped his coffee. "That's my price," he repeated. He bit into a slice of buttered toast onto which he'd heaped orange marmalade. He chewed. He swallowed. "It's going to go up to fifteen thousand in about half a minute," he declared.

Thomas gritted his teeth. He locked eyes with the diner who sat across from him. The thin man with the dry, withered skin continued to eat, as cool, calm, and collected as if he were an iguana sunning itself upon a rock on a hillside overlooking the serene, blue Pacific. "All right!" Thomas cried after a moment. "But there had better be nothing left of either one but smoke and ashes."

The arsonist caught the eye of a passing waitress. "Could I have another order of toast, please, and some more eggs?"

She smiled. "Sure thing, sugar."

Two days after Thomas' meeting with the wizened man in the Hawaiian shirt, fires had raged, reducing both Frank's clapboard residence and Richard's brick domicile to ashes, blackened lumber, and scorched brick within less than an hour, despite the fire department's valiant efforts to save both structures. Fortunately, both houses had been fairly far from Thomas' own, and Thomas' home had come through unscathed. The fire marshal had characterized the fires as "suspicious," but the arsonist that Thomas had hired was a mob-connected pro. It wasn't likely that he'd ever be caught. Even if he was, Thomas had made sure that his involvement in

the crimes was untraceable. Thank God for Swiss bank accounts, he thought.

In answer to Thomas' inquiry, the mayor had informed him that the smoking ruins of what had been Frank's and Richard's houses definitely were included among the property conditions that the law required to be corrected as soon as possible. Frank had already made arrangements to have the remains of his ruined house hauled off. Richard could make no such arrangements himself, unfortunately, having died in the fire that had destroyed his home. (He was certain to have died an agonizing death, news reports had observed.) Fortunately, Richard's widow, Grace, had assured the town council that she would take care of the matter as soon as possible, although she might need a few months to comply. That was fine, the mayor had told her.

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He also smelled the burnt-wood odor of the blackened timbers of his neighbors' fallen houses. Already, a bulldozer was busy in Frank's house, and the splintered, broken, and burned wood that had been his ceilings, walls, and floors was being loaded into a dump truck. In a few days, the ruins of the clapboard house would all be gone. It might take a while longer to be completely rid of what was left of Richard's widow's property. That was all right, though.

Thomas had waited forty-odd years to be rid of the eyesores that had been his neighbors' houses, and his own property, reappraised since the fires had destroyed Frank's and Richard's residences, had been revalued at \$300,000. He could afford to wait a few weeks, or even months, to be rid of the remnants of Grace's house.

He breathed deeply, inhaling the burnt-wood smell. It was like perfume to him.

Life was sweet, Thomas thought, smiling. Life was rich!