

Scott Reimann

Paul's Prospect

It is difficult to tell the difference between a dying house and a dead house. Some people—like Paul's parents—argue that once a house is abandoned and in a state of disrepair the house is dying and soon to be dead. Other people—such as Paul and the opportunists of the city—argue that a house isn't dead until it has been demolished and hauled to a landfill.

Gentrification had been running chameleon-like in many cities for a number of years and now it was sweeping Buffalo's West Side. For the first time in decades buyers were paying over asking price. Money was pouring in from down state and out of state. Day and night you could hear hammering, sawing, and drilling. Less heard were the gun shots and screams that filled the neighborhood a year or so ago. These were still heard among the din of power tools, but they were seen—by some—as noises of animals as they retreat from a habitat that is being more and more rapidly encroached upon. The last cries are the clarion laments to the habits and ways of life that endured. They are cries against large, encroaching forces.

Online Paul saw the listing for the house at 56 Prospect Avenue and he quickly took a Google Maps tour of the neighborhood. On the listing site there were no other pictures of the house besides a facing picture. From the Google tour he could see that the picture provided with the listing was quite dated. Still Paul saw the potential to make money. Paul's parents saw trouble. "That's a bad neighborhood." "You don't know what goes on over there." "Those people are animals. They're savages." While many of his friends had set out on their own, buying houses, charging rent, making money, Paul was still living in his parents' basement. Not looking at his childhood wallpaper was an upgrade, he thought. He looked around at the

furniture, the walls, the windows, the lamps and light switches. None of it was his. He wanted a place to call his own and he wanted to make money.

With a medical campus within walking and biking distance and bus lines running crosswise not far from the house, Paul saw the future monthly percent increases of his bank account.

He could do this. He knew he could do this. He had never done this before. He had no experience remodeling a house or measuring and cutting molding and trimwork, still he believed he could do what others were doing. He could do it better and he could make some serious money for himself. He knew he had to first put up some money. Like a downy, old dollar bill crisscrossed with creases, the old cliché sat crumpled waiting for Paul to snatch it.

Paul looked around him and surveyed the landscape. He saw competitors buying up houses all over the West Side. Good opportunities—like 56 Prospect—were running out. He had come late to the game and he knew he needed to quickly make a buy or he would be shut out altogether.

He was told to bid over, so he bid over. Then, he waited. In his parents' home he waited and paced.

“Jesus, Paul, why don't you sit down and relax a bit.”

Paul didn't seem to hear his mother as he stared intently at his phone's screen, his fingers pecking at it.

“Paul, why don't I get you something to eat.”

“Do whatever you want.”

Paul was toggling between a dating site and the house's listing site. He frantically refreshed both pages. The same women as last week appeared on his screen. He considered taking a jump at one of them. He told himself she'd be there next week and he couldn't deal with her and this house thing all at once. A call from Jocelyn interrupted him.

“Paul, a new buyer has emerged and has bid more.”

“How much more?”

“Five more.”

“He went five over me? Are you serious?” I went three over ask.”

“I know. I know. It seems crazy. I'm not sure I believe it either. I know the seller's agent and he is a slippery guy. He might have brought in this bid.”

“What do you mean ‘brought in this bid?’”

“In order to earn more money for his client, the seller, will ask a friend of his to make a competing offer on the property. He’s been in the game a while. He knows the market’s hot right now. It’s a seller’s market; people are desperate to buy. Anyways, this is pure conjecture. I don’t have any hard proof of any connection between the seller’s agent and this new bidder. I have no information about this party.”

“God. That asshole.”

“Listen, Paul. You can’t get caught up in all of that. You have to focus on you. Now, when we first spoke you told me that you really wanted this house. Is that still the case?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Ok. Good. You should go for it. You have the guts to get this house. And believe me it is going to take guts. I can’t believe this guy brought in his friends, but I’ll tell you it’s not altogether unexpected. I think you . . .” Paul thought it unexpected that this unannounced buyer appeared out of thin air and posed a real threat to take the house that Paul thought was his, and not only that, but take all the future monthly rental income out of Paul’s bank account. This guy was trying to take away his money. He was trying to steal outright. And not an insignificant sum either. Paul couldn’t quantify it, but he did know that this theft was in perpetuity. “I cannot believe this fucker.” He was mad at Jocelyn for not warning him ahead of time about this potential risk. He felt himself getting hot. His shirt felt tighter. His breaths came quickly.

“Jocelyn.” Now his words ran over hers. “Jocelyn. Jocelyn. Listen, I want to go for it.”

“Great. We have to move fast. I’m going to keep you on the line here and talk to the seller on my office line.”

“Ok.”

“So, Paul, I think we should bid ten over.”

With his voice flat, Paul said, “If you think it will secure the house, go ahead and put in the bid for ten over.”

“Ok. Great. I’m just going to set you down for a minute while I phone the seller’s agent and tell him your new bid.”

At first Paul heard some rustling, then he could make out Jocelyn’s voice, but not the words she was speaking. Parts of words, bits of conversation snuck their way to his ear. He heard noises from Jocelyn, but

no words reached his ear in a distinct enough fashion for him to correctly identify any of them. He could hear the negotiation, but not immediately influence it. The noises from Jocelyn came quickly. Her pitch was elevated, but her tenor seemed pessimistic. The negotiations affected him. Tone mattered. Tone affected him. He wanted to change the tone, but could not. He wanted to will the tone to change. But the harder he pushed, the harder he tried using his will, the less the tone changed.

“Paul? Are you there, Paul?”

“Yes, Jocelyn, I’m still here. What happened?”

“The other buyer came back thirteen-five over.”

“This is incredible. I can’t believe this.” The edges of his hair were becoming darker and wetter. His shirt seemed to pinch under his arms. Paul felt that this unnamed, last minute, surprise buyer was stealing from him. Paul had already placed himself in that house. He had already placed the downstairs tenants’ rent checks into his bank account. Now, this guy is swooping in and he is literally stealing from me. This is an injustice. I’m not going to let this guy steal from me. Paul felt he was losing his purchase.

“Go fifteen.”

“Fifteen might not be enough.”

Gasping, Paul coughed out, “Fifteen over not enough?”

“Fifteen-nine would make more of a statement. It would communicate a presence. It would suggest intimidation and assertion. Do you want this or not?”

Paul said, “Ok. Fifteen-nine,” but wondered if Jocelyn was colluding with the seller’s agent to boost her take, one more person taking power from him.

More indecipherable sounds from Jocelyn reached Paul’s ear. Now his nerves were undone. Into his phone he went. One woman’s profile then another and another. Faces, bodies, skin, allusions, judgments. Trying to recalibrate his internal scales, Paul approved of or dismissed the women who raced across his screen. For each woman he decided if he wanted to see (rare) or dismiss her (more likely). Here he was deciding and determining not only his own fate but others’ as well. Here he was in control. He wielded his power quickly, smoothly, and defiantly. His shirt suddenly felt looser. Air came to his lungs more easily. He breathed deep. He felt better.

“Paul!” Snapping him sharp as a crack his name jostled his fluid reverie.

“Paul. Great news. They accepted your bid for fifteen-nine over. Congratulation . . .” A sublime movie was playing in Paul’s mind. There was the big S crossed with the two vertical, parallel lines. To the right numbers recalibrated again and again and again. Always upwards, moving forever, deeper and deeper into the black. The series perpetually retabulating without cessation.

Just because the house looked dead didn’t mean that it was dead. With its loose gutters, flaking blue paint, and moldy wood, few who stood in front of 56 Prospect when Paul and Jocelyn were standing there would argue that it housed complex, conflicted lives.

With affected ceremony Jocelyn said, “I’d like to present you, Paul, with the official keys to 56 Prospect.” She dropped them into his upturned palm. “You are officially a home . . .” After Jocelyn dropped the keys into Paul’s palm, he closed his fingers, squeezed tightly, and stared down at his white knuckles clutching the source of his self-appraised enrichment.

Together they climbed the porch steps, walked over the threshold, and settled in the foyer. The front door, indifferent to its new owner, remained on the porch, its side leaning against the house, its hinges showing corrosion from the exposure to the elements.

At his back the icy wind rushed in through the bare door opening and gaping windows. A wetness persisted in front of these openings. From the window the carpet cast a deep brown crest then relinquished. Faded tan shag, torn and stained, covered the rest of the living room.

“Jesus. Look at this place.”

Jocelyn didn’t know how to respond. She feared that if she commiserated with Paul she would be seen as reinforcing what sounded like buyer’s remorse. Yet, the smell of mold and look of squalor was too insistent to be ignored. She resorted to her training.

“Paul, this place has amazing potential. Before long you will be able to command double your mortgage for this space. I’d like to see that check hit my account. Imagine how that money’s going to look ringing up your account every month.”

Paul no longer saw the hollow pucks of empty tuna cans. The stains disappeared. The whole rug disappeared. Replaced by hardwood floors that gleamed like a fresh sheet of ice. The windows, glass

restored, made a satisfying sound of fine craftsmanship as they comfortably slid up and down their wooden tracks. To Paul it sounded like a cash register ringing up a sale.

“I thought you sold and bought houses in this part of town all the time.”

“I have been for a while now.”

“You’ve had to have seen worse than this, right?”

“I have.”

“Paul, I do have another client to see. Out in the suburbs, Bowmansville. It’s a bit of a drive as you know. Now that you have your keys and you’re in your place you don’t need me anymore. Contact me if you have any questions about the place or the contract. Again, Paul, congratulations.”

Paul knew he owned the house, the walls, the doors, the windows, well the window frames, the light fixtures, the sinks, the toilets, the shower and bathtub, but did he also own that empty tuna can? What about the pizza boxes and hamburger wrappers? What about the tattered, frayed, and exhaust-stained clothes empty and dead on the floors? What about the salt and pepper shakers on the kitchen counter? What about the beer cans, pop bottles, hollow cigarette packs, and crumpled brown bags everywhere in the kitchen? Did he own the cigarette butt floating in the glass on the counter? And what about the gravy and hot sauce stained plasticwear in the sink and on the floor?

Slowly, as Paul answered questions to himself, he began to realize that he owned all of this debris. And was that gas he smelled? The smell didn’t dominate nor was it localized to the kitchen where the gas line ran. He thought he could smell it in the dining and living rooms as well. He was nearly sure of it. He couldn’t always pick it up. The smell would come and go. Here one minute in one spot, then gone the next in the same spot as the wind moved in and out.

It seemed unlikely he could just set all the garbage all at the curb and hope the city takes it away. It was hard to walk in the house without stepping on some piece of trash, a paper plate stained nearly transparent with grease, abandoned cheese partially eaten and molding, clumps of wiry black hair and strings of greasy dirty blonde hair littered the floor.

On each stair leading to the second floor a half moon of carpet was worn down to the plastic mesh reinforced backing. As Paul ascended the steps, the stairs wailed and wined their tired neglect.

Paul thought about the work that lay ahead of him and saw sweating, bleeding, and bruising. He saw an oversized rectangular dumpster resting bulkily across the lawn and front walk nearly infringing on the adjacent properties. He dreaded the repeated wheelbarrow trips up bowing flanks of wood. It all looked like struggle.

While he was wading in this dreary not-too-distant future Paul sensed a movement upstairs ahead of him. Then, a bellowing voice echoed.

“Yo, it’s time you got outta here!”

Paul stopped in mid ascent, his right foot one stair above his left. When he registered the voice as belonging to a black man, his frame froze tight.

Paul didn’t know what lay ahead of him. He did not know the layout of the rooms, where the closets were tucked, where the light switches were, which room lead to another, which room was adjacent to another, how the sun entered the rooms, how the shadows fell, what they hid. Paul knew the owner of the voice knew all those tactical details.

From the stairs he called back, “Listen, this is my house now. I just bought it. So, you’re now trespassing—”

“Your house! Your house! Oh, really. You just got here. I’ve been here. This is my house and I suggest you get the fuck out of it.”

“Why don’t you come downstairs and we can talk about this.”

Paul waited. He took no reply as acquiescence.

Looking out the large voided window frame Paul felt disassociated from the house. Earlier he felt warm and comfortable, his power aggrandizing. But, now the cold rushed in from the outside and touched him in a newly personal way, his vulnerability flapping and snapping in the wind like tattered curtains.

Now he looked around the room and saw the food wrappers, the stained, worn clothes, the ripped couch cushions. He saw a life lived. Not his life. Not a life he could ever imagine for himself, but a life that has always existed beyond his purview. Sure, he heard about these people. “Animals.” “Savages.” Broken eddies of news stories swirled in his ears. Bits of stories he’d read lay here and there on his brain’s floor. These were mixed with stereotyped emails and links he’d been forwarded.

Shouldn't he have heard the creaking of the stairs by now? Shouldn't he be staring at a man with flayed clothing, untamed hair, and wary eyes? Paul heard and saw none of these. He was still alone. He couldn't remember a time when he felt more alone. Always before, the task of confronting adults and mitigating tension had been the responsibility of his father. Paul now was an age most considered an adult, but he didn't see himself as one. He didn't feel like an adult. He didn't remember crossing the threshold into adulthood. He didn't know where it was. No one ever showed him. He didn't know who could lead him through it.

By now Paul was beginning to realize that no one was walking down the stairs to speak with him. He didn't really want that, but he knew he wanted that more than walking up the stairs himself—this time all the way—and speaking to whoever was up there. He really wanted the man upstairs to just go away. Paul closed his eyes and wished that ideal would come true.

But this situation, like his newly purchased house, was zip codes away from ideal.

Paul decided he'd have to confront the man occupying an upstairs room of his house. He wasn't going to do so without some instrument that sent a message. When he first started his job as a medical device sales representative his fellow reps told him to "fake it until you make it." With that advice in his head Paul tramped down the basement stairs in single pursuit of some blunt force object that told everyone he meant business. He skipped down the stairs until he was confronted with a musky smell and a pool of laundry covering the basement floor where waves of molding cotton stretched to the walls. Not knowing what existed deep under the folds and the muck nor what life the laundry lived prior to its final resting place here, Paul turned and marched back to the ground floor.

In his car Paul found the tools he'd brought to drop off for future work. He found the claw hammer. It was new, sleek, and aluminum for optimum striking swiftness. These modern hammers were engineered to provide optimum striking force with the slightest of effort. He grabbed a solid, steel flashlight too.

Crossing the threshold Paul, with hammer gripped tightly, entered his house and climbed all the way up to the second floor. The light was a leash that led Paul from the front. Paul forced his eyes ahead to try to anticipate what the light would show before the beam cast its power.

Paul didn't feel the real power of the beam until he entered the front bedroom.

"Hey, man, get that light outta my eyes, man. Get it off me!"

Startled, Paul cast aside the beam. In the shadows he saw a black man. Then, he moved the beam back into the strange man's eyes relishing the power inherent in the beam.

"I don't know who you are"—the beam steadied Paul's voice. It gave him the confidence of being the only one in the room of having all of his senses fully functioning—"but you have to leave."

"Get that damn light outta my face or I am going to come after you."

Paul moved the light. When he did he noticed there was another man next to the one he had been speaking to.

"What are we doing, man? Who are we bothering? We're just trying to be invisible. We're in here off the streets. We're in a town the rest of America doesn't care to notice or when they do they don't care about us. We're in the part of town pretty much forgotten about except by those of us who live here. Now, you drop out of the sky and tell me we need to leave this place."

Looking into the darkness of the room, focusing on no point in particular, the black man shook his head.

Again, he raised his head to speak to Paul. "Let me ask you something: how long you been here?"

"About an hour."

"An hour. Huh. How long you think we been here?"

Prior to the man's question, Paul never thought about his history. Paul wondered how this man got here. By here Paul meant to this state of being without a home. He pondered for a moment. Numbers came to his head, but each one he tried out made him seem silly and uninformed, so he just shook his head.

"I'm not sure. I can't even make an intelligent guess."

"Nine years. Nine years. We been here in this house nine years. This has been our home."

Nine years ago Paul was still in high school. He was breezing through some senior government class caring only about whether Devin would have a pipe or joint when they met after school. Food? Shelter? That all had been taken care of. It wouldn't have even occurred to eighteen year old Paul to consider the means of his food and shelter. Twenty-seven year old Paul never considered his means of food and shelter.

Paul lowered his arm. The beam shone short and straight down at Paul's right shoe.

Into the darkness Paul stared. He heard breathing. He couldn't tell whether it was his own or the man's.

Suddenly from downstairs they heard crashing footfalls. Instinctively, Paul snapped his light beam in the direction of the open door. The beam faded into the light pouring up the stairs.

“Vic, we know you’re in here.” More than a statement of fact, a man’s words from downstairs signaled imminent threat.

“Vic, come on down here.” Paul was breathing audibly. “If you don’t, we’ll come find you and your boy toy, Melvin. You know our work. You don’t want that.”

Paul shot the beam back at the black man. In the quivering white light Paul could see the man waving his arms.

Paul didn’t know how to interpret the semaphore. Keep quiet? Get out of here? Hide? Turn that damn light off?

Paul could here heavy footfalls downstairs. Paul felt sure there was more than one person, but he couldn’t be sure exactly how many were down there. The downstairs wasn’t that large. If you were looking for someone, there were not many places to seek him. They seemed to be going over each room a few times. Paul thought he heard someone’s footsteps pound down the basement stairs. They seemed to be methodically canvassing each room, as if someone had dropped some money and they were carefully going over every inch of flooring to find it.

“Listen,” Melvin whispered to Paul. “Hey kid, get over hear and listen up.”

As Paul approached Melvin he could now see there was a white man, his eyes big, silently staring at him. Paul felt an oddness come over him. He approached these men. Were these the “savages” his father warned him about? Or were these the “animals”? This was discovery for Paul. These men were homeless—or were they? Apparently they had been living here for the past nine years. Paul thought them homeless, but wasn’t sure if that was exactly technically true. Other than ignoring their pleas on the streets as he quickened his pace and averted his eyes, this was his first sustained encounter with the type of people he nearly never thought about. They looked vulnerable.

“Shut off that light. Now, listen.” As Paul approached the men he entered a deep, thick smell of sweat and decay.

“Careful now. Over here. This side of me.”

Paul moved to the side of Melvin where he was furthest away from the white man. The white man was moaning. He made sounds. He tried to form words and arrange them into neat, expectant sentences. Paul strained to listen. Fragments of the sounds resembled parts of words he could recognize, but his ears were too unfamiliar to decipher meaning.

“It’s alright, Vic. It’s ok. Just keep your head down. Keep your head on that pillow.” At a subaural level Melvin seemed to understand what Vic needed. Paul saw that Vic had lay back down on his side. Warmly and reassuringly Melvin was rubbing Vic’s shoulder and back. With the gentleness of a feather landing on the ground, Melvin’s words found Vic’s ear. Vic’s convulsing shoulders slowly eased their tremors.

Turning back now toward Paul, Melvin spoke only a bit louder, but now his words carried more weight. “Listen, kid, I don’t—”

“My name’s Paul.”

“Ok, Paul. I don’t know you from anything, and you don’t know me, but believe me when I tell you that you best get out of here fast. And I mean like right now, brother.”

“But, this is my house.”

“Does it sound like those guys downstairs care whose house this is?”

“They don’t know you’re here. It’s best it stay that way. Those are men whose insides are empty. Right now they don’t know it, but you’re a problem for them. If they see you they will solve the problem.”

As Paul listened to Melvin’s words his mind was partially occupied identifying different odors. Paul thought he detected a flavor of gas more potent than before. Was there gas on the floor here? There were too many swirling odors to say for sure.

“There’s a rear balcony off the back bedroom. You’ll have to jump from there, but going downstairs is not an option.”

“But, this is my house. These people are trespassing in my house, on my property. I should have them arrested.”

“Vic, last warning,” the voice boomed from below. “Come on down here so we can talk. If you make us climb the stairs to see you, there will be talk and action, but you’ll be doing little of either.” A deep, dull thud resonated followed by a metal clink and a hollow metallic swishing sound of liquid.

“Paul, those guys don’t care about that. They’ve been arrested before and by dinner time they’re down the street having empanadas waving to the cops who arrested them earlier. They work for people. I don’t quite understand it myself, but these guys never go away. If in the rare occasions they ever do go away, their replacements are on the scene the next day. Usually less tolerant than the previous version what with trying to make a name for themselves and all.”

Paul wished he was back at his parents’ house. His wide, warm bed, the spotless dining room, the sun casting gleams off the polished and lacquered furniture, the spotless kitchen through which he could look out on a backyard of a seemingly endless swatch of grass, the birds bounding across on their springy legs—all of that is just twenty miles away. But, now that seemed oceans away.

“We know these guys. We know how to talk to them. Leave and come back later.”

After considering for a bit, he thought it best to heed Melvin’s words.

Taking his claw hammer and flashlight with him, Paul left Melvin and Vic on the floor.

He retreated out of the room. He found the back bedroom. Absent a door, access to the back balcony was nakedly and starkly outlined. Incrementally, careful not to give himself away, Paul eased his weight onto the tar paper.

He felt diminished. He was outside on the back balcony of a house that had been abandoned for many years—at least for the last nine apparently. Was it dead or dying? Melvin and Vic lived here, apparently. Does that mean the house isn’t abandoned? Paul considered while the house looked abandoned, the structure itself was occupied. Two people lived here. Or at least seemed to be trying to make a life here. He didn’t know whether or not he considered them homeless. They lived in a home, it just wasn’t theirs. Paul supposed—a vibrating crash brought Paul back to the perilousness and immediacy of the present situation. Another shaking crash caused Paul to hold onto the wood siding to steady his quaking legs. The crashings continued each one reverberating more seriously than the previous. These were poundings. It sounded like drywall was crumbling and wood was snapping. But there was a booming, final quality about it.

Paul heard shouting. Then, there were muffled sounds. There seemed to be some scuffling, some wrestling. A struggle maybe. Paul didn’t peak and expose himself. Besides he’d only be looking into darkness and if he did peak in he wouldn’t see much of anything. He figured trying to look posed a greater

threat to himself—if Melvin’s words were to be believed, which it seemed from the crashing and struggle they were—then what he could gain by seeing inside.

After a while the muffled noises ceased and the wrestling ended.

Paul heard men walking out of Melvin and Vic’s bedroom and back down the stairs. He waited. He wanted to be safe. “Animals.” “Savages.” Paul thought himself wise for waiting, for not blowing his cover by entering too soon, for avoiding the chance for those people—“Animals.” “Savages.”—to hear him walk across the floors.

He heard voices that seemed to wrap around from the front of the house. He heard car doors close shut. Inching his head around a corner Paul saw a black car with black windows speed away.

He went back inside. There he found Melvin and Vic laying side by side. From their bodies, mouths, and ears blood coalesced and pooled on the floor.

The acrid smell of smoke caught Paul’s nose. Quickly he waded through the bursts of smoke rushing upstairs. Driving down the stairs deeper into the densest smoke, Paul had to cover his nose and mouth. Not so much from the smoke tears ran from the corners of his eyes and streaked his face. His path forward was blocked with fire and smoke. He turned and went back upstairs.

The flashlight’s beam shone steady on the bloody bodies. As the fire crackled and grew downstairs and more and more smoke filled the bedroom, Paul considered what to do. He first thought to fully heed Melvin’s advice and jump from the balcony. But, he didn’t act on this first urge. Paul bent down, wrapped his arms under Melvin’s, and interlocked his fingers across his bloody chest. Walking backwards Paul dragged Melvin’s body out of the house and onto the back balcony. He went back inside for Vic’s body.

The floor felt hot. The air was warm and the smoke was becoming thicker and more stifling. Paul heard the fire downstairs, the whooshing of air being sucked into the house by the fire, the cracking wood, and the erosion as the fire’s flames slowly and tirelessly lapped the framing and walls.

Now all three bodies were on the back patio. Flames had punched through the first floor windows and were teasing the edges of the roof Paul stood on. Around his ears and neck Paul’s hair glistened in the light of the flames.

He looked and stared down. He saw a backyard, narrow and deep, covered in snow. To his left he assumed a concrete driveway existed. To his right grass. There was maybe eight to ten inches of snow on

the ground. It was tough to say exactly how much here or there. Recently there had been a bit of a melt on, but today had grown colder and a freeze was back on. The snow looked wet and heavy.

Paul didn't know the best way. Feet first was likely best. He picked up Melvin's body, rested Melvin's backside on the black metal railing and swung over his legs. He held Melvin under his arms. He nudged his legs over the edge of the balcony's floor so they hung down. As he edged Melvin's body closer and closer to the edge Paul braced himself for when Melvin's full weight would be his responsibility alone. Praying that it would hold, he wedged his legs in the metal railing to brace himself.

With the railing holding, Paul hung down over it maintaining his hold of Melvin under his arms. He thought it important that when he released Melvin's body it was leaning forward a bit so as not to crash back against the house. Paul wanted to try to do the least amount of damage possible. He hoped Melvin's feet would land first then his body would fall face first into the snow.

As Paul loosened his grasp, Melvin quickly slid down. In the snow his legs were splayed and his arms rested limply at his sides.

In a similar way Paul eased Vic's body over the edge, then released. Vic's body crumpled onto the snow next to and partially covering Melvin's.

Paul was next. The flames had moved beyond introducing themselves and were now imposing their presence onto the balcony. Before he leapt Paul realized for the first time that he smelled of hard sweat. He looked at himself and noticed he had two kinds of blood on him.

He was able to use his legs to push himself off and a bit away from the house. He got up, ignored the radiating pain in his knees, and pulled the bodies away from the house and toward the garage.

Next to the bodies Paul sat. He was wet and his clothes showed darkened stains. He watched the flames sparkle and twist up his house. The smoke climbed high, not an unfamiliar sight in this neighborhood. Slumped and weary Paul watched his house burn and listened for the approaching sirens.