

An Orange Wedge

It was a beautiful day in the neighborhood when Floyd took a bullet to the brain. Under the sharp February sky his luck turned as dry as the oak leaves scattered across the lawns.

Maggie Bruce called 911. George, outside planting flowers, looked up at the shouting in Floyd's front yard—You stupid bitch, shut up, Floyd yelled and punched his young girlfriend over and over. Her face reddened, puffing with each blow.

Floyd, George called, Floyd, stop that! Stop hitting her. Stop!

Old George couldn't do anything. In his prime he had hands the size of hams. Even fifteen years ago when he fell and broke his leg, George just hauled himself into his pickup truck and drove two hours back to town. But on this day, George stood helpless because Floyd was too crazed to hear.

The incident occurred on a neighborhood cul-de-sac facing the creek. A tree-lined, dead-end street, with an asphalt circle. Floyd's house sat at the very end. It was the newest home on Laurel Court, and that had been a bone of contention.

Years before Floyd came, the neighbors enjoyed looking at the lush vegetation down on the vacant lot. The tangle of ferns, palms and pines gave a feeling of wildness and peace all balled together. Vines dangled from trees and a moss carpet crept towards the creek. Most important, the neighbors agreed, it was wetlands and so narrow that no house could fit on it.

The wedge stood empty for years. Neighborhood children climbed its magnolia tree, kicked through the underbrush, and squished across the muck. Everyone was content until the day a big work truck appeared on the lot.

Parked overnight, just like that. Not every night, but often enough. The neighbors wondered about it while Maggie phoned the City. It's illegal to park this big a vehicle in a residential neighborhood, she said. And the City sent people to issue tickets each time it happened.

It turns out that Floyd's daddy owned that wedge and Floyd needed a place to park his truck. Too bad, not here, the neighbors chorused.

Floyd had a temper. Young and bullheaded. He didn't like it one bit that someone had turned him in to the authorities. So he posted a sign on the magnolia tree:

I'm going to find out who the fuck told on me.
Mind your own fucking business and
stay the fuck out my way. FJ

Well, Maggie and Grace Wheeler ripped that sign down as soon as they saw it. Children live in this neighborhood, they said, and the young ones don't need to read such trash. Maggie told folks that Floyd drove by the next day and cursed at her. She was just standing in her front yard and he shouted terrible words at her.

But things settled down and went on as before.

Decades earlier, Maggie's daddy owned all the land. He gave Maggie and George their acreage when they married. They're retired now and still remember when wild country surrounded their house, with raccoons, armadillos, and deer roaming about. That was before the developers tamed the land into a city subdivision. Somehow, years ago, Floyd's daddy acquired that wedge. He used it to dump trash, just once in a while, deep in the underbrush. Maggie would call and report it.

On this brisk blue day, Floyd stepped out the door one last time. He held the girl, with his gun at her throat. They stood in the sunshine. I'm gonna kill her, he kept shouting. A police officer, lying on his stomach two lawns over, squeezed the trigger. A bullet exploded through the back of Floyd's head.

The idea of Floyd building a house stunned the neighbors. They began to buzz when a land surveyor's marks appeared on the empty pie wedge. Small orange flags highlighted the property boundaries of the sliver sitting between Maggie and Grace Wheeler's yards. As if that weren't bad enough, a considerable number of trees, including the great magnolia, had a white "X" on them.

What does this mean? These trees—will they be cut down?

Sure, that's what it meant. Somehow Floyd figured out a way to put a tidy bungalow on that pie wedge, up front near the street. The land wasn't as narrow as everyone thought. Construction commenced.

The families milled and muttered but followed Mrs. Wheeler's example. She was the most Christian. It's not what we want, she said, but he's moving in with his family. We need to welcome them.

People were cordial to Floyd and his two children. His wife didn't seem interested in knowing anyone on the street. A couple of neighborhood boys found their way over to Floyd's trampoline out back. AJ and Michael, both in high school, laughed at Floyd's jokes and irreverence. Mom, said Michael, you should see Floyd and his buddies jumping on the trampoline after they've been

drinking a bunch of beer. His mother said, I don't want you over there when Floyd has guests. And I certainly don't want you in his house.

Floyd lived in his bungalow for five years, being treated cordially. He gave the loudest parties and his friends parked all helter skelter around the cul-de-sac, so it was hard for folks to back out of their driveways. But they just looked the other way. They were trying to be neighborly. And it was nice that Floyd threw the football around with his son and the neighbor boys. Floyd was the youngest daddy on the street. That happens when you become a father at 15.

His little girl took dance lessons and owned a white dog that looked like a fluffy snowball. And Floyd wrestled his backyard jungle into submission. He planted his orange trees, hibiscus, and elephant ears. In fact, he did a fine job landscaping. Floyd's teenage boy moved away for some reason. Grace Wheeler knew that it had to do with breaking the law, but she didn't say anything at the time.

A big old fishing boat showed up in Floyd's yard. He'd take it out at night and catch fish to sell. He worked during the day for periods of time, but he changed jobs a lot. He liked to tinker with that boat, though. The problem, once again, was that the boat was too big for a residential street. Maggie and Grace Wheeler said, Floyd you need to rent one of those boat slips, but he just ignored them. So they called the City and tickets started appearing again. Floyd finally sold the boat.

This past Christmas, Floyd's wife moved out of the bungalow, taking the little dancer and the white snowball with her. When AJ and Michael came home from college, Floyd told them that he'd been in a rehab clinic but was better. Things were quieter, he said, now that the wife was gone. She had too many rules. When she left, he yelled after her, You can have everything in the house, but I'm keeping this land.

Sure, they nodded, with the air of worldly men.

And I have a new girlfriend, Floyd told the boys. Met her in the rehab clinic. Twenty-one years old and wanting to have my baby. He winked and said, She's wearing me out. Floyd was between jobs just then but things were looking brighter.

Over the next month the rescue unit and police visited weekly. The new girlfriend suffered from panic attacks, Floyd explained. She's all right. Sorry for all the screaming going on over here, but everything's fine. That wasn't all. Sounds of things smashing against walls echoed down the street. Folks opened their front doors and stepped outside, wondering what to do. Some called the authorities. A few neighbors asked if they could help Floyd somehow. No, no thanks, he said.

Maggie, George yelled, Call 911, call 'em now! When George reached the front door he grabbed the phone. There's a man beating on a woman here, he hollered. Send a patrol car quick.

The woman's shrieks soared as Floyd dragged her back into his house, pulling her by the feet, yanking her body across the grass, sidewalk and threshold. When the police car arrived, the officers heard the screaming and smashed down the door. Police, they shouted.

Get out, bellowed Floyd, or I'll kill her. I will! The officers inched out and called for backup.

A SWAT team arrived on the scene. All the police knew was that a man had a female hostage and he owned a gun. Silent and quick, the sharpshooters scattered through the yards, on the roofs, and around back by the creek. Negotiators were setting up, but not ready yet.

A few houses up the way, Debbie looked out her front window and saw Elizabeth's newspaper still in her yard across the street. Now, she thought, Elizabeth always has her paper by this time of day. What in heaven's name is going on? She opened her door and stepped out. As she crossed the street she saw a police car down by Floyd's house. She picked up the paper and walked to Elizabeth's front door. No answer. Strange, she wondered. Is she all right?

Debbie turned around. Standing in the middle of her street, she looked up in the other direction. That's when she saw the pack of police cars at the end of Laurel Court and red tape stretched across. Lady, one of the men yelled, get out of the street and into your house. Debbie hurried home and positioned herself at the window.

Floyd must have been out of his mind by then; he was probably back on those drugs. He stumbled out the front door holding his shotgun to the girl, pressed against her neck. She was screaming enough to make neck hair stand up. Floyd yelled his head off, and the SWAT guys marked their target.

Floyd dragged his new girlfriend back in the house. In that moment, there was a chance he could turn it around and move away from the edge. Maybe he knew it; maybe he was already past that point. Maybe he had passed it a long while back without him or anyone noticing. How could the neighbors know? He seemed affable much of the time, a decent guy when he was clean and sober. They didn't want to say or do anything that would set him off. They just wanted the neighborhood quiet again, the way it used to be.

He stepped out one final time.

Officer Moore took a clean shot. The girlfriend kept screaming as two officers grabbed her and ran her up the street. Debbie said later that she only wore a tee-shirt, nothing else. They put her in a police car and took her to the hospital for anxiety.

The quiet was sudden that day and the chill kept everybody inside, waiting. The rescue unit hustled down the street to find Floyd lying in his yard, blood seeping into winter grass, his oranges ripening all around. Then they were gone and the neighborhood quieted down, like it used to be.

Floyd was 36 and died that evening at the hospital. His mother sat with him, held his hand, and whispered, It's all right, Floyd, mama's here. He squeezed her hand once and then let go.

George's winter flowers bloomed over the next few weeks. His white open board fence provided a background for their yellows and lavenders. Floyd's orange trees dropped their fruit into the silence while the sky held fast to its pure winter blue.