

Unknown places

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [June 2, 1999](#) issue

When I came home from the hospital with a broken ankle, I was feeling fragile and sick from pain and the anesthetic I had been given. I sank quickly and gratefully into the sturdy green recliner in the exercise room. To reassure myself that the outside world I had abandoned during my time in the hospital had remained solidly the same, I raised my eyes to the window to see what was happening next door.

What I saw wasn't reassuring. For the first time I could remember, the shades were open in the house across the way, and Miss Butler's side front window was open wide. There was no one in sight, though a dilapidated red and blue pickup truck was parked in the driveway.

This wasn't the worst of it. I watched in stunned silence as Miss Butler's battered kitchen stool, its butterscotch-colored vinyl seat torn from front to back, appeared in the window. A moment later a pair of grimy hands chucked it out and into the bed of the truck that was already half full of shabby clothing, frayed towels, boxes of used Christmas tree lights, dented kitchen pots, a worn-out clothes hamper, a crushed cardboard wardrobe and all the other everyday things our neighbor had used or at least valued enough to save.

This discarding of Miss Butler's life as though it were nothing more than rubbish shocked me. For nearly 20 years the elderly Miss Butler had lived alone in the house beside us. She was only about 60 when we first moved in—and she had been sturdy, vigorous, eccentric. She had lived in that house since she'd been a child.

In the years we dwelt side by side, she had always been the one to harass the electric company when the power went out or nag the phone company when the lines were down. She had survived two vicious assaults when her home was burglarized.

As far as we had been able to tell, she never had much money. In our first years she seemed to live on the income from a number of part-time jobs she could do at home. More recently she had come to rely on Social Security, various social services, and

the kindness of a nephew who lived on the other side of town. Once her arthritis became really bad we hardly ever saw her.

We learned later that, too weak to take care of herself after a devastating stroke, she had been moved into a nursing home. Unknown to us, she had already sold her house, apparently with all its contents still in it, to a real estate agent who intended to renovate it and sell it for a profit.

And that is exactly what happened. While my leg was mending in its cast, the anonymous workmen came, not only roofing and painting and putting up new gutters but also tearing down the rickety walls that had enclosed Miss Butler's front porch. By the time the cast was off and I was staggering around on the walker, the outside of the house was elegant. It looked nothing like it had six months before.

In the months that followed, work on the inside continued. The bathrooms were remodeled. A new kitchen, which we could see from our bedroom window, was put in. The old floors were refinished and the brown walls were painted white. Through it all I mourned for Miss Butler, whose house was disappearing before my eyes, and for my own failings toward her. How could I have been the kind of neighbor who thoughtlessly conducted herself as though I expected her to live forever? I should have known better.

Job describes what happened perfectly:

As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up; they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.

Death may indeed be the natural end of life, as the modern platitude goes. Still, when the place in which you've spent your life no longer knows you, it is a terrible thing, and it is an insult to the dead and dying to pretend that it isn't. Thank God for the promise of the renewal of all things—whatever unknown form it may take. I can only look forward to the time when God will wipe away every tear and death will be no more.