

The House Always Wins

by Eric C. Wat

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There comes a time in most men's lives (usually when he's 25) when he realizes that his father is just as full of shit as anyone else. But that's okay, because by the time he turns 35, he'll realize he's no better than his father. In between these two epiphanies, I had to turn to two other men as authoritative figures. The first was my doctor - I cowered in his presence and would never talk back. (There's a story here that I'll save for some other time.) The second was my accountant Frank.

I met Frank almost four years ago after I left my last job at First 5 Los Angeles . Not wanting to take on another full-time job, that year I started doing a lot more consulting gigs and amassed quite a bit of untaxed income. Around tax time the following year, I realized that I could no longer do my own taxes. Frank was my dad's accountant. He had to ask me a lot of questions to put together enough deductions so that I wouldn't have to liquidate the savings account that I had had since I was 12 to keep Uncle Sam at bay. He set up a quarterly payment schedule for me.

And before I left, he issued this edict, "Have a kid, or buy a house."

If you had spent 10 minutes with me, you'd know which path I would pick. (Really, this ain't Sophie's Choice.) To be honest, I was no more ready to be a homeowner than a parent. I always imagined that I would rent until I'm 40 or 50, and only then would I consider joining the ranks of the propertied class. Besides, it was still the height of a seller's market at the time (2005). But Frank had spoken. I had to at least make an effort so I wouldn't completely disappoint him the following April.

There are certain things in my life I know I'll get done when I set my mind to it (and sadly relationships is not one of them). When I said I was going to write a thesis on the gay Asian community, I quit my great job at UCLA, became a waiter to support myself, and finished the thesis in a year. When I said I wanted to turn it into a book, it took me just months to find a publisher. When I decided to live alone, I found a two-bedroom apartment in Silverlake that cost \$650 a month - a deal you couldn't make with the Devil himself (and the landlady knocked off another \$50, thank to some good old-fashioned Chinese haggling on my friend Amy's part). When I left First 5, I wrote a manifesto on the kind of job that I wanted to have. Two months and two meetings later, I landed at SSG with a position that came pretty darn close. Some things just come easy for me.

And much to the disgust of many, finding a house is also one of them.

Around this time, I met Helena, who had just become a homeowner herself. I went to her housewarming party and met her realtors, a husband-and-wife team. Georgia was a former beauty queen from SF Chinatown, and John quit a good corporate job several years ago to move out to California to be with

her and soon followed her career path. Naturally, we struck up a conversation and I told them about my accountant's instructions. They gave me their card and said we should talk. I put it aside when I got home, but John was persistent. So I thought, why not just start looking? Given the market, it would be next April before I'd find anything I like. Even if it hadn't worked out, it would be just good experience, anyway. And I'd have a story to tell Frank.

I found my house in Hermon on the second day. It didn't have everything I had wanted but it was the first one that I could see myself living in. It was also the first house I bid on. The escrow went without any major hitches (as escrow goes), aside from some tough (and smart, according to John) maneuvering on my part to get the owner to lower the price another \$5,000.

The confusions of the transition from renters to owners are what drive me to write essays like this one. From the very get-go, I resisted the identity of a homeowner. I bought a house, but I drew the line on major remodeling. I didn't hire gardeners for my yards. Some found it odd that I wouldn't rent out the spacious basement with its separate entrance. I wouldn't even buy a washer-dryer unit or an outdoor BBQ grill - all symbols of settle-downness. After I bought the house, I also gave up the idea of updating my 1997 Corolla and started taking the bus more often.

I didn't know what all that was about until a friend once complimented me on taking public transportation in LA; she called it a noble act. "It's okay," I responded. "I'm what you'd call a 'choice' rider. What's noble is people who get up five in the morning and catch 3 buses just to get to their minimum-wage job. Try doing that 5 days a week without a choice." (Yes, leave it for me to be both self-deprecating AND self-righteous at the same time.) As I recalled this conversation once on the bus ride home while observing my milieu, I realized that I'm a middle-class kid with working-class aspirations. I really don't mean this as a good thing, but more as a common contradiction of someone with some privileges working in progressive communities. Our political ideology told us there are certain things we're not supposed to want, lest its mere possession would corrupt our hearts and/or minds. A house ranks pretty high on that implicit list.

Truth be told, I'm as prototypical a middle-class kid as they come. Everything that I thought had come easy to me was a result of mostly privilege and connection (sometimes disguised as luck), and then some hard work and good old-fashioned discipline. For instance, my book was published because of the dearth of gay Asian materials out there at the time more so than my own academic prowess. My cheap Silverlake apartment was a product of knowing Amy, whose family had lived downstairs for years and could vouch for me. And likewise, my bid that won me the house wouldn't even be looked at if my parents - thanks to their own obedience to Accountant Frank - had not had enough money to help me with a robust down payment. My parents went to college, and that was expected of me. They are homeowners, and now I am one. My political ideology might not have looked kindly on it, but my life was a series of one middle-class benefit after another.

There is a chain reaction that I set off (or at least am a part of) when I bought a house on a mostly renter-occupied street in Hermon. My neighborhood council is over-represented by homeowners, many of whom had an exclusionary agenda that I hope I don't ever share. (We need a recycling center somewhere, and most people on the council don't even live as close to it as I do. And seriously, when has the bus stop close by your house become a liability?) And lesbians and gay men (of any color) are often the first wave of gentrification, whether they're renters or owners. (Yes, we "improve the quality of life" in a neighborhood and make it safe for the even more annoying wave of families with young children.) Even if it's ironic that I hate the food at the new Japanese restaurant where a mom-and-pop burger stand used to be, it wouldn't be there had people like me not moved in. This all has to mean something about how I relate to my neighbors, doesn't it? I'm not one of them renters anymore, but as much as I don't have a right to pretend nothing has changed, I don't want to one of the guys on the other side either. These observations continue to plague me, at least until richer people start replacing my neighbors and I become the guy who refuses to keep a neat front lawn or build a garage to cover his hideous Corolla.