

**The First Two Pages: “The Dark House Down the Street” by Richard Helms**

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An Essay by Richard Helms

A few months back, after my wife and I had been self-quarantined for about two months, I received a request from Lynn Chandler Willis to write a story for a new anthology entitled *Writers Crushing COVID-19*, intended to serve as a fundraiser for the book industry that had been so sorely hit by the pandemic. Only catch—the deadline was quickly approaching.

Fortunately, I had a story in the works already, and it only needed a couple days of work to complete.

“The Dark House Down the Street” features retirees and downsizers Bud and Cath, who are almost instantly recognizable as me and Elaine (my childhood nickname was Bud, and Elaine's first name is Catherine). It revolves around a mysterious dark house in a cul-de-sac down the street from their house in an unintentional “geezer ghetto” they moved into after downsizing. This plot was based on fact. There is a government-owned house down the street in our current neighborhood that several people have tried to buy without success. I joked to

Elaine a few months back that it's probably a CIA safe house, and the story wrote itself from there.

As happy as I was to provide a story to help relieve COVID-19 distressed publishers and booksellers, this piece also reflects another trend I've pursued recently—the graying of the Boomers and how our refusal to fade away has impacted society as a whole. I retired from my own career as a forensic psychologist and college professor about four years ago. Elaine followed suit, retiring from her career as a marketing manager and business communicator a year later. Around the same time, we downsized from our lovely plantation house “back in the trees” in rural Union County, NC, where we had lived for almost a quarter-century, and moved into a quaint neighborhood in South Charlotte, NC. Like the neighborhood in “The Dark House Down the Street,” we discovered quickly that most of our neighbors were also retirees, and I frequently joked that we had inadvertently moved into a “Geezer Ghetto,” just like my protags Bud and Cath.

My story “See Humble and Die” in *The Eyes of Texas*, which was was nominated for a Derringer Award this year and was selected for the 2020 edition of *Best American Mystery Stories*, featured an elderly retired Texas Ranger and part-time private eye named Huck Spence. I also recently sold a screenplay built around my longtime New Orleans protagonist Pat Gallegher—not as the hale and hearty

fifty-year-old of the short stories and novels, but instead as an aging college professor approaching seventy.

As I have officially breached the gates of “old age” and am now happily collecting Social Security and enjoying my Medicare benefits, I realize that—regardless of the wear and tear evident on my crusty exterior—I still feel strong and vital inside and occasionally encounter difficulty connecting my inner juvenile delinquent with the codger staring back at me in the shaving mirror. The older I get, the more I realize that age is no limit to curiosity and creativity. In fact, growing older tends to embolden a person. In our Golden Years, we have already sidestepped just about every way to die young, which endows one with a certain fearlessness regarding death and a greater willingness to take chances. I want my protagonist “old people” to represent that notion and to remain engaged and active— and even a little randy on occasion.

Like Bud and Cath, Elaine and I quickly discovered that a neighborhood filled with retirees can be a pretty lively place, and I hope this story reflects that, along with providing a decent little mystery in the process.

### **The First Two Pages of “The Dark House Down the Street”**

I spent most of my twenties and thirties terrified I might die young. As the owner of every anxiety disorder in existence except for obsessive-compulsive disorder (*Is that spelled right? Is there a hyphen in it?*), I passed many stressful hours in my youth waiting for

some doctor or another to enter the room with a somber expression and utter the ponderous name of the dire affliction which would surely put me on the wrong side of the sod before the end of the year.

With the passage of years, and the impossibility anymore of dying young, I look back on those angsty decades with embarrassment. The rolling years and the occasional betrayal of my trust by the world has mellowed me somewhat. Dying sucks, for sure, but it seems the older I get, the less it sucks compared to continuing in a world I find increasingly befuddling.

Not that I'm in any hurry, you understand. No rush here. Happy to keep plugging along for a while yet, if it's the same to you. That's why my wife Catherine and I sheltered in place as this damned virus held the country hostage. We were early adopters. Had been in self-quarantine lockdown for almost seven weeks. Our groceries were delivered. We left the house only to walk to the mailbox and take out the trash. We were in a high risk group for serious complications—you know, old folks—so we took it seriously.

I didn't mind it so much. As I reached retirement age a few years back, I decided to give in to my inner J.D. Salinger. Four years into retirement, I was doing a bang-up job as a recluse even before the virus came along. Living on lockdown was barely an inconvenience for me.

My more socially competent wife, though, was a different story. No more evenings at wine tastings or trivia nights with pals. The Y was closed, so she couldn't work out. No shopping. No grandkids. Cath took her Zumba classes through the miracle of Zoom, but it's just not the same, is it?

So, like millions of other households across the country, we coped, as best we could. Some days were better than others. Some were even great. Others? Not so much.

We downsized several years back. We decided to move to a place with a higher population density and a lower mortgage. Nearby shopping, doctors, and dentists were an incentive as well. Priorities change as you age. We wound up in a neighborhood largely populated by other retirees, a fact we discovered only after moving in. For a while, I joked that we had landed in a Geezer Ghetto, which would be unfair because it's really a lovely place. Convenient, too. We weren't newcomers for long. Boomers stick together, having been hippies and communists half a century ago, so—despite my blissful introverted seclusion—over time we've gotten to know our neighbors. People on

our street look after each other, in normal times. Under lockdown, we waved at each other from across the street and three doors down, because social distancing was a priority.

I went out to get the mail the other day, and found an envelope addressed to a house a couple hundred yards away, on a dark cul-de-sac at the end of our street. It's happened before. Our house number and their house number can transpose easily. Mistakes happen. The envelope was from a lawyer's office. Looked official and was fully stuffed. Probably important.

The sidewalk was empty. I strolled to the cul-de-sac and opened the mailbox at the address on the envelope. Noticed it was addressed to someone named Earl Crosland. I couldn't recall hearing that name, but Cath was on the social committee for the homeowners' association, so maybe she'd recognize it. I shrugged, slid the envelope into the mailbox, and closed the door.

"Hey!" someone called out. I startled and turned so quickly I got a stinger in my neck. A man stood in the front doorway of the house. He wore dark trousers and scuffed loafers, with a white shirt and suspenders. His collar was open. His tie hung partly loosened. His head was bald.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

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Retired forensic psychologist and college professor Richard Helms is the author of twenty novels, including *Brittle Karma*, the third title in his San Francisco-based Eamon Gold PI series, which comes out this October from Black Arch Books. Helms has been nominated eight times for the SMFS Derringer Award (with two wins); six times for the PWA Shamus Award; twice for the ITW Thriller Award (with one win); and once for the MRI Macavity Award. His story "See Humble and Die" (*The Eyes of Texas*, edited by Michael Bracken, Down and Out Books, 2019) was selected by Otto Penzler and C.J. Box for inclusion in Houghton-Mifflin-Harcourt's *Best American Mystery Stories 2020*. A former president of the Southeast Chapter of Mystery Writers of America and a member of the MWA National Board of Directors, Helms and his wife Elaine live in Charlotte, NC.