



# NARRATIVE

STORY OF THE WEEK



**Nafari Morris** is a writer and award-winning columnist who has worked in North Carolina, Connecticut, and Florida newsrooms. She lives in Florida.

## Suburbia

A STORY

BY NAFARI MORRIS

**HENRY CLOCKED IN** a couple of minutes before nine, as usual, and right away it was obvious that something was off. There was usually collegial ribbing or general banter, especially on Fridays. There were usually at least a dozen men preparing to man their positions on the factory floors. This morning it was so quiet Henry thought he might have accidentally reported to work on a holiday. There were just a few people getting dressed, and when Henry spotted Marty at his locker, he approached him.

“What’s going on this morning? Somebody die?”

Marty, Henry now realized, had his locker open and a cardboard box at his feet. In the box were his steel-toed boots and some other clothing.

“Just got laid the fuck off,” Marty gruffed, shoveling the few remaining items into the box.

“What?” Henry recoiled. “What do you mean, laid off?”

“I just got called into the corporate office, they said they were downsizing, moving some services overseas, thanks for your years of service and get out please without the doorknob hitting ya.” Marty kicked his box away from the locker and slammed the door shut. He looked at Henry through narrowed brown eyes. “Fifteen years, and it’s over. Just like that. Fuck these people.”

Marty took his box and Henry walked ahead of him to open the door. “Thanks, man,” Marty said. “Best of luck if you keep your job.”

Just then a message from the overhead announcement system: “Henry Clayton, please report to corporate building 2D.”

They exchanged a solemn look, and Marty left with his box. Henry walked over to the corporate campus, which looked as though it had been remodeled a bit, with fresh green, white, and yellow paint—the corporate logo colors. He went to swipe his badge, but the door was held open by Naomi Fitzhugh. “Good morning, Henry,” she said, all business, her face neutral, hair pulled back, her blue business suit perfectly pressed.

“Morning,” he answered, angling himself into the door. “So you’re in HR.”

“No,” Naomi answered. “Communications.” They walked down the hallway and took a left at the second opportunity. They were indeed headed to human resources.

“Well, if you’re going to offshore everyone’s jobs, you wanna have the right messaging, right?”

“I’m really sorry about this, Henry. I’ve never been involved in anything like this before.”

They stood at the door marked Wylie’s Human Resources. Naomi gestured for Henry to open the door.

“You’re not going to escort me in?”

“I’m sitting this one out,” Naomi said. She really did look bothered. “Listen, just let me know if there’s anything Ed and I can do for you.”

“Swap jobs?”

The corners of Naomi’s mouth curved upward slightly, but it could hardly be considered a smile. “Take care.”

They stood there a moment longer, and Henry thought they were having what he would have called a human moment until he realized she couldn’t leave until he opened the door. He put his

hand on the knob, exhaled, and turned it to enter the room. As he closed the door behind him he could hear her heels as they clacked evenly on the polished gray floors.

**NAOMI FITZHUGH** didn't like her kitchen. It was small and didn't make any sense. The refrigerator was in the middle of the room and the stove was across from it, both like islands in the kitchen. This meant that the only counter space was around the sink, which was, once you put in a dish rack, now at about five feet worth of space. But she knew that her disdain was becoming visible and she tried not to let it. So she'd make dinner, a roast chicken with green beans and new potatoes. She would do it with a smile on her face. Ed had talked about adding more counter space, after all. She'd give him time to do it.

She could hear him upstairs in the bathroom, directly overhead. Naomi put the chicken in the oven and stepped back to assess what else needed to be done. Then she remembered the load of laundry she'd started the previous night, still in the washing machine. Naomi sucked her teeth and opened the basement door. This was another thing she hated about this house, this narrow stairway with unfinished walls. It felt like something out of a Poe story. The air down here felt thick and humid. Toward the bottom of the landing, the wall on the right side jutted out for no reason, narrowing the path even more. It was like walking through a cave.

She got to the bottom of the stairs and turned left toward the washing machine. Overhead, she could hear Ed flushing the toilet. Before her eyes a substance was coming up through the drain in the center of the room. Naomi took a step back as this substance expanded. What was it? She turned around and hopped over whatever it was, headed back up the stairs, and leaned over to examine the sludge from the banister.

She spotted something yellow, several yellow blobs. They looked like corn kernels.

She yelled for Ed, who came sprinting down the stairs and stopped in front of her.

"Look at that," Naomi said.

By now the sludge had nearly reached the wall just beneath where they stood and was beginning to recede back into the drain. Also, it had begun to smell. And the smell made Ed realize what

they were looking at, especially because he had eaten the leftover corn from the previous night's dinner for lunch.

"That's not possible," he said.

"What?"

"That the toilet would be backing up down here?"

"Are you saying that this is your . . . poop?"

"But that doesn't make any sense."

"There's one way to test it." Naomi took the remaining basement steps two at a time, then the steps to the bathroom, and flushed the toilet and turned right back around. Before she could make it to the main floor, she could hear Ed groaning.

Both of them had taken to throwing their dirty laundry down the stairs, and whoever was heading to the laundry room would take it all the way to the washing machine. But it was clear they couldn't do that anymore because the second flush had covered nearly the entire basement floor and enveloped several of Naomi's pairs of underwear and one of Ed's favorite shirts.

"Why did you flush the toilet again?"

"I . . . I thought we were testing if the toilet was coming up in here."

"We already knew that. Now our clothing is ruined."

"Are you blaming me for that?"

"No, I'm just saying to think first before you act. Now we've got to scrub the entire basement floor."

Naomi stood up, and Ed could tell where this was going. "I'm going to take a shower and go to bed," Naomi said, "unless you think that'll be a problem too."

Ed sighed, then considered if the shower too could possibly be a problem. When Naomi turned the shower on, he tiptoed, for some reason, over to the basement door and was relieved to hear nothing.

**MARGARET'S YARD** needed to be maintained, and that required going outside and working in the side yard, and that required looking at the yellow monstrosity (that seemed to be getting brighter every day) across the street. But it needed to be done, and so Margaret headed out, putting on sunglasses and a wide-rimmed straw hat.

The too-bright house was still there. Fortunately for her, she could stay somewhat hidden from view in case that dimwit Ed

came out of the house. He was always smiling, and she couldn't imagine what for.

Almost as soon as she settled on her knees among her flowers, Ed emerged, wearing clothing that was blotted by paint. He was carrying two paint containers and she watched him as he dropped the cans into the large trash can along the side of their house. He headed back toward the house, and now it looked as if he was talking to himself.

Tonight the block's residents would bring their trash out for a Wednesday pickup, and she mentally reminded herself to take out theirs and then corrected herself. Henry would do it. He had no job and seemed unable to figure out what he was supposed to do with himself. It appeared that Margaret would have to answer that question for him. At least Ed, as annoying and colorblind as he was, was working. His wife wasn't home so he didn't seem to need anyone to motivate him. Henry, she was starting to fear, was unmoored and starting to drink heavily again.

He had a phase like this about fifteen years ago. Her father called her one day, right after the new year, and told her that the quality of Henry's work was slipping and had he perhaps been drinking too much? He also forbade her from missing another holiday party. He knew why she didn't go—she had applied for a secretarial job at Wylie's without telling her father or Henry about it. Her father found out, of course, and let her know that no daughter of his would be working anywhere but in the house. Her father told her to settle down—he would promote Henry soon, give him an office position that would bring in more money. And when that happened, Henry wouldn't have time to do much around the house—that's where she came in. He was trying to be conciliatory, but the conversation made Margaret so angry that at the last minute, she refused to go to the party. She sent Henry by himself, which she knew her father wouldn't like, and she didn't care. But something changed after that, and Henry never did get promoted. Her father didn't budge on her getting a job, either. She knew that her not going to the party, which would have been considered a measurable act of rebellion on her part, was the reason Henry never got moved into corporate.

Whenever she asked her father, he'd always say Henry needed the right time and opportunity. One time when she asked, he said, "Margie, honey, if you had been a man, I'd turn Wylie's over to you

right now.” That comment, made years ago now, still made her think. What did she have that her own husband didn’t? Now she thought she was starting to understand the answer, and she didn’t like it. Henry was pliable, which was nice in a marriage, but he was reactionary too—he didn’t make things happen. Rather, things happened to him, and maybe that’s what her father saw. Maybe he was right. But if he was right, that meant Margaret had to make things happen. She might have to find Henry a job, push him into productivity.

She stood and stretched, wanting to break out of that loop of thought. She glanced over to the Fitzhugh house and wondered what color it was painted on the inside. Then she replayed Ed’s most recent trip to the trash can and something occurred to her. It made her set down her pruning shears and disappear into her house for a quick phone call.

**HENRY SAT** on the porch, a place he hardly left during the day anymore. At first the layoff wasn’t so terrible. He hated his job. There was nothing interesting about working low-level management in a factory, working on the line and also shuffling papers. It was, however, an easy way to make money and have insurance. He thought more and more these days, though, about the fact that he could have made even more money with even less effort (except for wearing a suit and tie every day) if his father-in-law hadn’t caught Henry with his executive assistant in a moment of weakness at a Christmas party. If that hadn’t happened way back when, he probably wouldn’t have been laid off.

And yes, he worried about money, but not too much, not right now. Margaret had received a healthy inheritance from her father, who died several years earlier. Their house had long ago been paid off, and they’d be okay—even able to maintain the Rolling Hills club membership—for one more year, even if he didn’t find anything. Henry surprised himself with his inability to even start looking for a job. Every time he logged onto a job website, the complexities of the job titles and application requirements seemed too much. A résumé, for instance. What would be on his résumé? One job, held for twenty-six years, two job title changes. There wasn’t a lot of room for someone with a lot of experience, not in his field. Some of these job ads made him sick. He rejected many of them outright because they sought people with one to three

years of experience and were willing to pay them thirty grand a year. Yet they didn't seem open to someone like him, with decades of experience, who would never need to be trained. After viewing one such ad, he'd shut down the computer, dejected, and gone to sit outside on the porch, and that's what he'd been doing every day since.

That meant he'd get to watch Naomi Fitzhugh hustle down her stairs each morning to her sensible sedan and drive off to her "internal communications professional" job at Wylie's. That was her title on LinkedIn.com. A former coworker had suggested he sign up on the website and he started to, only to encounter the same problem with the résumé. Even with a half-complete profile, LinkedIn.com recommended People You Might Know, and there was Naomi, who "worked with" him at Wylie's. She had attended Spelman College in Georgia for journalism, then worked for CNN briefly as a producer. Then she began work as a public relations specialist for two small companies, each a three-year stint, and then she started at Wylie's as an internal communications professional. Anyway, Naomi always seemed in a hurry and this morning was no different—she was balancing a work bag, a large black cylindrical container of what Henry assumed was coffee, a blue lunch tote. She never seemed to spot him or wave to him, which was more than fine. He couldn't think of anything nice to say to her at the moment anyway.

This morning, though, Naomi, just before climbing into her car, looked across the street to Henry and waved. "Morning," she called, sounding a bit wistful to Henry's ear.

He raised his hand to offer the tiniest of acknowledgments.

Naomi smiled and put her hand on the car door handle, then pulled it away. She placed her coffee and bags on the fender, and turned toward the street and walked across to stand in front of the Clayton house, her heels making small, staccato sounds against the pavement.

"Look, I just wanted to say again how sorry I am about what happened," she said, talking rather fast for a communications professional, Henry thought. "And I, I feel really terrible about it. If there's anything you need or anything we can do to help, we'd be happy to do it."

"Wanna swap jobs?" Henry answered, a tired joke, yes, but he had little energy for much else. Naomi tried to smile at it again.

“Look,” he continued. “I know it’s not your fault. I know how that place works. Honestly, it just annoys me that there’s no room for me but there’s always room somehow for people like you.”

Naomi wasn’t smiling anymore. “What does that mean? People like me?”

What Henry had meant, truly, was that people who work with their hands, the tradespeople, the low men on the totem pole, the people who actually made the things that people buy—those were the people whose contributions were undervalued when it came to budgetary matters, and that people who dressed up nice to work in executive suites, people like Naomi Fitzhugh, standing before him in a black-and-gold silk-looking blouse, black slacks, and a gold bracelet on her left wrist that might have been doubling as one of those fitness app things, who had fancy titles, they just talked about the products that people like Henry made—made fancy labels and bottles for them—but they got a raise every year on the dot. But as soon as the words left him, he realized he shouldn’t have said them, not in that way, and not to someone with a face of this particular hue.

“I, I just meant, you know, the people who don’t get their hands dirty.” He realized that didn’t sound much better..

“You have a good one, Henry. Mr. Clayton.” Naomi turned and walked back to her sedan, her steps sounding much less musical now.

**EACH TIME** Edison Fitzhugh stepped out of his house and walked onto Evergreen Drive, he felt good, as if he had arrived. It was a good neighborhood with good people, if a little quiet. This was good, he thought. But Naomi, a native city dweller, worried about the quiet. She wondered if people minded having a biracial couple living among them, but Ed couldn’t imagine that being true. “It’s not the 1960s anymore,” he told her.

*They just need to get used to us,* he thought to himself as he approached their mailbox. He opened the box, and there were far more envelopes in there than usual, and most of them were from the city’s code enforcement office.

Ed brought the mail into the living room and sat down, laying all of it out on the coffee table. They’d been receiving a few citations lately—for tall grass, for leaving trash cans out too long. Ed had heard that a city compliance officer lived a few blocks away



and took his job seriously. There were four from the city for Ed and four for Naomi. He opened one and read a letter informing him that he was not in compliance with city code PA 0452, which addressed the proper way to discard trash. Specifically, the note went on, he was accused of discarding construction debris in a household trash can. The second page was the ticket itself, which laid out at the end a fine for two hundred dollars.

Ed threw the letter down, confused. He thought he must have been reading it wrong. On the table were seven more letters that looked like this one, and he pulled out one addressed to Naomi and ripped it open. It was much the same thing. If all these letters were the same, it meant that the Fitzhughs were on the hook for sixteen hundred dollars in fines for not throwing out their trash correctly.

How would anyone know that? he wondered. The Fitzhugh trash cans were kept in their side yard, and who would have a view of that? And what was construction debris?

Ed pulled out his cell phone and dialed the number at the bottom of the tickets and asked for the code enforcement officer who signed them.

“Yeah, this is Joe Thomas.”

“Hey, Joe, this is Ed Fitzhugh,” Ed started, trying to sound as friendly as possible. “I’m up here on Evergreen Drive and I just got some tickets in the mail about trash disposal? I wanted to see what was going on.”

“Y’can’t throw paint cans in your regular trash,” Joe said.

“Well, where are you supposed to put them?”

“You can take ’em back to where you bought ’em,” Joe answered patiently. “You can get a commercial hauler. You can’t put ’em in your trash. Y’also had some wood, carpet, and looked like concrete? Y’can’t do that either.”

“What, are you going through my trash?”

“When you put it on the sidewalk on collection day, I have that right. I wasn’t on your property.”

“That’s what you do all day?” Ed asked, his voice rising and shaking. “You’re going through trash?”

“I’on’t go through everyone’s trash,” Joe said. “When I get a tip, I investigate it.”

*A tip.* Ed thought immediately of the older couple across the street, the man who lost his job where Naomi worked. But no.

They didn't seem like the types to do something like this. Maybe this guy was lying about receiving a tip.

"This is a lot of money," Ed forged on. "Why are you fining me *and* my wife? We're in the same house."

"Hey, I on't know who did it. Listen, you want to fight it, you can ask for a court date," Joe answered. "And you can take it to a judge. All right? I gotta hang up." Then he did.

Ed listened for another second or two, not quite believing he'd just been hung up on. Worse, these tickets were not a mistake or a misunderstanding. They were intentional and as of this moment, he and Naomi owed the city of Duquesne sixteen hundred dollars in fines.

"You gotta be kidding me," Ed whispered to himself. He turned over the page and read about how to challenge a ticket in court.

**MARGARET** PACKED her cooler into her trunk and prepared to make the trip to an away court, at the Oxford tennis courts, when Ed emerged from his house, waving her down.

"Hey, hi!"

She stood by her car, saying nothing as he approached.

"Hey, I see you're headed out, but I just wanted to run something by you real quick," Ed said. "Do you know a Joe Thomas?"

"I do," Margaret said coolly. "I've known him for years."

"Great," Ed continued. "So apparently someone called the code enforcement people on us because of paint cans in our trash? Which is crazy, but the guy, Joe, came and checked it out, said that we owe the city sixteen hundred dollars in fines over throwing something out the wrong way. I tried to talk to him about it, but he wasn't really hearing me out, and I thought, I know you've been here a long time and maybe knew him and could talk to him."

"What would I say?"

"Well, maybe vouch for us, let him know we're not bad people," Ed said. "It never occurred to me I couldn't throw trash out in my own trash can. And I also don't know who would have called him in the first place. Do you?"

"I called him," Margaret answered neutrally.

Ed stared back in silence for a moment. He looked as if he was trying to decide if he'd heard her right. "Wha— you called who, code enforcement? On us?"

“I did. You should be recycling. Everyone on this block recycles. It’s damaging to the environment when you don’t.”

Now Ed’s face was turning red. “What do you care about recycling? And why wouldn’t you just come and tell us if you thought we were doing something wrong?”

“It’s not my job to tell you. It’s code enforcement’s job.”

“We got fined sixteen hundred dollars. We can’t afford that!”

“Well, it’s probably that much because the city’s over here all the time with the grass situation. You know, I have a regular lawn man—I’d be happy to give you his number.”

Ed took a step back. “Wait a minute. You’ve been calling them all along on us?”

Margaret didn’t answer.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Is this because of your husband’s layoff, which had nothing to do with Naomi?”

“There’s no ‘this,’ Mr. Fitzhugh. I care about this neighborhood, and what you do to your house affects everyone on this block. You park on the street when you have a perfectly useful driveway. No one parks on the street here. Haven’t you noticed that? You also clearly didn’t notice that no one else around here has painted their house in an obnoxious color.”

“What? Is this an HOA now? You got a problem with my car?”

Ed rolled his eyes and chuckled harshly. “You know what? You and your husband just stay away from me and my wife, you stuck-up bitch. Don’t even fucking look at us.”

“That won’t be a problem for me.”

“Wow. Naomi was right about you.” Ed turned and stalked back across the street.

When Margaret got into her car, her hands were shaking. She wrapped them around the steering wheel until they weren’t. Then she started her car.

**ED HAD CALLED** Naomi immediately after his confrontation with Margaret, and even now, several hours later, over dinner, he was stewing.

“That bitch is gonna cost us almost two thousand dollars,” Ed said. “Why’s she picking on us?”

Naomi gave him a look.

“Oh, come on,” Ed grumbled.

“There’s no other mixed-race couple on this block,” Naomi said.  
“That’s not a coincidence.”

“Everything isn’t about race.”

“I didn’t say everything. I said this.”

He sighed. “You’re probably right. Shit. What kind of people get into petty shit like that? I mean, what are the chances that we’ll fight this and win?”

“Well, the duplications are too much and unnecessary,” Naomi said. “They have to at least reduce that.”

“What are we going to do?” Ed said, rubbing his forehead miserably. “They’re going to do this all the time.”

“They are.”

“This is my house and I’m not fucking leaving.”

“Well, then, I guess we can set aside about four thousand dollars a year in fines in our annual budget.”

“No, we’re not doing that. Two can play this game, believe me.”

Naomi exhaled. “Listen, Ed. They’re not good people. Just don’t talk to them anymore. They’re not worth our energy.”

“We can’t just let them keep doing this to us,” Ed said. “We have to figure out how to make their lives miserable so that they quit fucking with us.”

“Ed, look, I know how you can get. Can we just take a day to calm down and take a breath here? I don’t want to get into a war with these people. Let’s just ignore them.”

“We ignored them before, right? And what did that do for us? Look, you don’t have to worry about it. I’ll take care of all of it.”

*That’s what I’m afraid of,* Naomi thought. She said, “Fine, I guess.” 