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Burning Bridges as We Go  
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## Misunderstood

Everyone noticed he didn't smile. Which made them suspicious. And he appeared ill tempered. Which made them angry. Especially how he tended to size them up, his new neighbors, when they gathered under Sue's shady Red Oak tree each evening to drink their Pabst Blue Ribbons and white wine spritzers and sometimes, when the occasion called for, champagne sunrises. It was his face. The way he held his jowls clenched, his mouth grim in a straight line, tilting his head down, staring at them with piercing blue eyes in a way that suggested inspection and judgment. And his presence felt intimidating. Big and imposing – a mountain of a man really, standing six foot four, with heavily muscled arms and gnarled hands that could tear muscle and tendon right from the bone. He moved surprisingly faster than they thought possible too -- like a Greek Minotaur stalking his labyrinth, sure to turn you into mincemeat if he caught you invading his territory. To his neighbors, the women residing on Duro Court cul-de-sac in the town of Granbury, Texas, he was a grumpy old man no one anticipated liking. Who walked the neighborhood every evening like he was on a mission, but otherwise wouldn't give them the time of day.

"He's probably divorced and restless, y'all," reported Sue to the assembled neighbors on the second consecutive Tuesday the neighbor made his rounds. "He's gotta be

nearer to sixty and not a spring chicken, I can tell you that." She'd spent days watching him come and go from his house – the locally named "Lollipop" house – which'd been sitting empty for more than a year and not believed likely to sell. Summer'd given way to fall and fall was busy decaying what summer had burnt, so most residents thought the place would sit till spring when the weather lightened and everything turned beautifully green again. But just as September crested, the old man arrived with a young Keller Williams real estate agent to take down the "For Sale" sign and set the neighborhood speculating over who'd just bought the place.

"Be surprised if there's a family to go with him, I tell you what," Janice insisted. "That place is way too small for anything more'n one person. Maybe two, if they're on the smaller side. Which he ain't. Don't know how he's gonna do it. Me and Roy walked through the place during that last open house and y'all wouldn't believe how small it is inside. I doubt Roy could even fit in the bathtub."

"Roy cain't fit in none of our bathtubs," Sue laughed, "the way you keep feeding him like you do. The man's gained near fifty pounds for every baby y'all've had."

"Well, a man's love is always gained through his stomach," Janice replied, "Didn't your Mama ever teach you that, Sue? Plus, keeping 'em well fed keeps 'em off your backside for a while, if you know what I mean. Especially when you don't want no more babies. Four is plenty for me to be sure."

"Apparently I married a different kinda man. Mine don't stop long enough for a snack let alone dinner. Which I don't mind much cause he stays in shape and pays the bills. But shoot, it'd be nice if he'd remember our anniversary every now and then before he's out the door and down to the airport flying off to Bora Bora or whatever damn place he's being sent to next. Shoot, I don't think he even remembers the name of his only child."

“Well, bless his heart.”

“And kiss my housekeeping, baby free ass while he’s at it!”

Sue and Janice looked at each other and started laughing. Neither envied the other, which is why they could tease each other and still be such good friends.

Actually, all the neighbor ladies -- known collectively as the Lawn Chair Brigade due to their evening habit of gathering together in Sue’s driveway under the shady Red Oak to sit in lawn chairs and look out over the cul-de-sac -- did know the Lollipop house was on the smaller side. Each one had made a point to walk through the place during at least one of several open houses held during the year. But it was Sansa who first referred to the place as “Lollipop” years ago.

“Y’all can see the driveway’s narrow. Only one car can even fit up there to the garage. That’s the stem. And it runs narrow between my house and Celia’s till it hits the back corner of them four properties and blooms into a small circle with the house in the middle. The whole thing looks like a Lollipop on a stick from my second floor bathroom window.”

Which, to be fair, was a pretty accurate description.

“Well, I hope he knows to bring his Halloween candy out front to the end of the driveway in a bowl is all I can say,” Karen mentioned. “Maybe someone should tell him. I don’t want my kids walking back there anyhow since we don’t know him. But if he don’t leave candy up front proper, some teenager or other gonna mess with him. Those JV freshman football players last year were holy terrors is all I can say! I told Miles he’s gonna stay home this year with a bullhorn and the hose out to spray them if they get too close to our place. Just to be on the safe side, you know.”

“Shoot,” Celia chimed in, “When Dale heard there was a new man living on the cul de sac, he ‘bout jumped outta his Barca Lounger to go drag the poor man off to Sears on one of his and the boys weekend shopping trips. I told him to let the poor man settle before he and his friends go bothering him about what kinda lawn mower he owns or what kinda barbeque he sports or what golf clubs he strikes. Hell, we don’t need to be keeping up with the Jones no how, but he’s always intent on it, y’all know. Men can be so ridiculous about their toys. You’d think they’d have better common sense.”

“Well, I can tell you no one comes or goes from that place except him,” Sue said. “He leaves every morning just after nine. Probably to go to Dunkin Donuts over on Marcum like those old men y’all see reading the paper and drinking coffee down there. And he don’t come back till after two at least -- always carrying takeout delivery from the chicken place up the street and always with one of them brown paper bags like they got over at the Bowie corner store. Y’all know what’s inside there too. Glug-glug,” Sue added tipping her pinkie up and pointing her thumb down like she was drinking from an imaginary bottle.

“It don’t have to mean that,” Sansa said. “The brown paper bag thing. Plus, he’s an adult. I imagine he can take a drink if he wants to if it don’t hurt nobody. Unless it’s a Sunday, of course. Plus, he probably don’t even got himself a plate and fork set up yet, let alone a cup to drink with.”

“Maybe,” Sue replied, “but I know a future friend of Bill’s when I see one.” Sue was the self-appointed cul-de-sac querist - or what most people referred to as a “snoop” -- the neighbor with the most gossip, the most need to insert herself, and the most need to be right. “Y’all can see he takes himself for a walk every evening after dinner, but do he ever look steady when he do?”

“He walks fine as far as I can tell,” Janice added. “But it’s the way he gives us the old “stink-eye” every time he passes I mind most. Have y’all noticed he don’t say boo to us, not a “hi” nor “how do,” but he’ll stop and chat up the kids playing down the street? What’s with that?”

“I did notice that,” Sue said. “Just two days ago, I saw him stop and say something to Audrey Severs up on the corner when she was hula hooping. He stopped and said something and she laughed. Then he smiled and walked on.”

“He did not.”

“He sure did. As plain as I’m standing here. He smiled.”

“Well, Audrey is pretty cute.”

“That’s what I mean. What’s a grown man doing talking to a little girl, cute or otherwise, let alone smiling at her? What kinda man does that and then gives us the sour look?”

“Maybe he’s a granddad?” Mary Beth chimed in, rubbing her arm and feeling the goosebumps. She was uncomfortable with such insinuations. They struck a nerve in her a little too close to home, though none of the other ladies knew that.

“There’s more,” Sue continued. “Y’all know Jimmy, right? Who delivers the mail? Well, Jimmy told me he started delivering to the Lollipop house, like bills and Cabela catalogs and Sears’s mailers and such. But he also drops off three magazines, special ordered - Newsweek, Highlight Kids, and The New York Times Sunday edition.”

“That’s not unusual,” Celia commented. “Getting the mail. Well, except the New York Times. If Dale finds out about the Yankee paper thing, he’ll think this guy is a commie or gay or something worse. Like a democrat or something.”

"Not that part," Sue interrupted. "Jimmie says this guy hasn't gotten any personal letters to the house either. Not a one. No postcards or nothing. Which Jimmy says ain't unheard of but is pretty rare and something he ain't seen around here before. But he's already delivered four legal letters to the Lollipop house -- two from the Granbury Police Department and two from the Granbury District Attorney's Office. How about that! No mail, gets a Yankee newspaper, a kiddie magazine, and gets legal notices from the police? Don't y'all think that's odd? Hell, more than odd. That's suspicious."

"Not necessarily," Sansa replied. Sansa was the neighborhood's only official college graduate, with a bachelor's degree in political science, who often felt the need to counter Sue's logic. "Why would that be odd? I mean William and I get Newsweek. I also get Highlight Kids for the girls just like most of y'all. I don't get the New York Times though, but I knew a few girls in college who did. Or at least they read it. They were all Yankees and not from Texas either, but still. It's not like he's waving a red flag in front of a bull or anything like that."

"Don't be so sure," Sue replied. "I don't like it when he stops and talks to our children when we don't know anything about him. Where he come from, who he is. And he sure ain't exactly the friendliest of neighbors. Not to us. He hasn't tried to introduce himself or be friendly or nothing. But he's all kinds of attentive to our kids when they're playing on the street? And he gets notices from the police? This is Texas after all and we don't cotton to that kinda Yankee stuff. Y'all don't find him suspicious?"

"Maybe his wife is coming at a later time," Mary Beth chimed in, more uncomfortable than ever, "Or his kids are grown up and he gets the Highlight Kids for his grandkids, for when they come around next, you know. That's how it would happen on the *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* or *Step by Step*." Mary Beth liked to lose herself in Nick at Night shows after putting the kids to bed and her husband, Billy, left for his overnight twelve at Saber

Manufacturing. She didn't always realize she was living vicariously through them though.

"Then why would he buy such a small place?" Sue reasoned. "Plus, there ain't no woman living there, or gonna live there. I can tell you that just by looking at the place. It weren't decorated by no woman."

"How can you tell?" Celia asked.

"Well, y'all know darn well how I know. I went over there to welcome him like a good neighbor, but he weren't home at the time."

"And did you happen to go over when he coincidentally was away on a walk? That kinda welcome?" Sansa asked.

"Oh, bless your heart, Sansa. I was being a good neighbor is all. Anyway, there weren't no pictures on the wall or furniture in the living room or normal stuff like that in there. Nothing to indicate a family. But there was a bunch of books stacked against the wall with some of them like true crime stuff. Crime scenes and child psychology, and something called forensic pathology. And one, I swear, was all about ways to avoid being caught by the police. That sorta thing."

"I have to admit," Janice said looking concerned, "that does sound suspicious. Those aren't your typical Reader's Digest books to be sure. More like when you hear the news talking about a kidnapping or murder and the bad guy turns out to be this neighbor that's lived there forever and everyone thought was, like, quiet and kept to himself. But he was this creep all along who studied police tactics and all. And everyone always say, 'He was so nice. He kept to himself,' but he weren't."

"And get this," Sue continued encouraged, "he had a recliner with a side table and a pair of binoculars sitting on top. No rugs, no plants nor vases with flowers or accents of

any other kind, y'all. Just them books and binoculars. Who's he spying on back there except to look in other people's backyards where our kids play?"

"Well, he hasn't really been there that long. And he takes them binoculars with him when he goes walking. Plus, his stuff might all still be in boxes." Sansa suggested.

"No boxes either. It's bachelor life in there for sure. No wife. And definitely no kids coming or going from the place. And did you see anyone helping him move in? I surely didn't."

"I wasn't home when he did. Maybe we missed them?" Mary Beth wished.

"No, he's alone, y'all. And up to no good. I got a pretty strong feeling about this one," Sue added. "He's that neighbor who everyone just knew it was him, but no one did anything before."

"Maybe he's in the witness protection program like on *CSI*," Mary Beth considered. "Or some con man running a scam like on *Better Call Saul*. Or, oh, how 'bout this? Maybe he's a hitman for the mob like on *Barry*. He could be something like that, right?"

"Or maybe he's just a private guy who's new to the neighborhood and getting settled," Sansa corrected. "Shouldn't we give him a little benefit of the doubt before deciding he's an ax-murderer or worse?"

"Well, y'all think what y'all want," Sue cautioned. "But I believe better safe than sorry. We have our kids to think about. And the neighborhood. Y'all have to admit he don't exactly fit. There's something off about him."

"I got a cousin," Karen said, "he's a deputy over in Dallas. I bet I could maybe give him a call and have him run a background check on this guy? If you was to write the man's name down for me."



“Why that might be good. I can ask Jimmy what his full name is. Whoever he is, y’all, it would be good to know as much about him as we can,” Sue said. “For all we know, he could be really dangerous. That’s what my gut says. Remember that lawn care guy, Pedro something or other, who drove around here that day trying to get work. Only then he tried to steal Jennie’s kid’s bikes right out of their garage? I had a gut feeling about him too.”

Janice laughed. “We all had a gut feeling about that guy, Sue. He practically had a sign declaring himself a meth addict who was here to rob our homes. He wasn’t that sophisticated. The police said so when they arrested him.”

“Yeah, well, who was the one to spot him stealing and call the police? It was because my instincts told me something was up! I have a way with that.”

“I don’t know,” Sansa said, “I’m not saying you’re wrong, Sue. I’m just thinking maybe we give him some time. He hasn’t been here that long. Let him settle in first before we make that kind of a decision about him. Try to get to know him better first.”

“Wait for what? He’s already ignored us when we tried to be nice. And it don’t take that long to get settled. Not in that tiny place. So what do we wait for? Till he murders one of us? Or hurts one of our kids? Not this hen! I got chickadees to think about. And that man is way too unfriendly not to be all kinds of bad, y’all.”

The new neighbor could’ve been a lot of things, but Sue was right about friendly not being one of them. Except where children were concerned. Come some kid playing in the street and he seemed to have no trouble stopping to chat with them. But he rejected nearly every adult in the neighborhood when they tried to welcome him. When they brought casserole dishes over and tried to introduce themselves. He thanked them well enough but never asked them in. And because he had a “nervous” stomach, his digestive tract couldn’t handle their food. He did thank them for their visits and

promised, once he'd gotten settled, he'd come join them for a Saturday barbeque. But not today. Then he'd firmly close the door.

Now if that wasn't outright rude, then it sure wasn't friendly. Which, in Texas, was about as sinful as you could be. No one liked it. Nor him for it. And it had the Lawn Chair Brigade seeing red.

"He's just a mean old man," Celia determined.

"Bitter and alone so screw him," Karen added.

"Doesn't have the sense God gave Adam," Janice intoned.

No one appreciated being rebuffed.

Except he could be thoughtful at times. Like picking up the trash in front of Karen's house one morning after the garbage trucks scattered soiled baby diapers, old milk cartons, and used fast food wrappers into the street and left. Or returning delivery packages to Celia's immediately, all nice and stacked up on her front porch, if they were dropped off at his mailbox by mistake. And even pulling a few missed weeds from the flowerbeds out front of Sue's.

And then there were the children. Somehow, out of the two dozen or so who played around the neighborhood, none seemed scared of him. The Lawn Chair Brigade saw him stop once to play right field, a hated position for most of the boys because it meant standing in the storm gutter and risk losing a missed ball. But the old man, the Minotaur, didn't complain and even managed to keep a few balls from the gutter. At bat, he sent the boys into a frenzy of 'oohs' and 'ahhs' when he hit Tommy Joe's fastest pitch well beyond their center fielder and nearly to the end of the street. A veritable Babe Ruth homerun in their books. He was popular with the boys after that and they took to waving at him when he passed by. He'd even wave back. One afternoon, they

saw him take a turn holding the jump rope handle for the girls practicing double dutch on the sidewalk. And never complained once about his arm "falling off" twirling the rope for longer than his turn. He also played tag with the little ones once or twice across the lawns. And surprised them with how fast he could run. Even though he seemed not to be able to catch them. "You guys are too fast!" he'd laugh.

All the children seemed to love him. But most of all Becky -- Sue's precocious nine year old who tended to play by herself most days because the other kids were "boring." Who really didn't prefer to associate with any kids her age and, as such, was considered an "odd duck." She really seemed to like the Minotaur. Especially after she accidentally kicked a ball that hit him in the back of the head one day as he walked by. She stood frozen, too afraid to move, thinking he was about to turn and yell at her about being "irresponsible" like her father might do. But all the Minotaur did was rub the back of his head and laugh. Picked up the ball and rolled it back to her with a "nice kick" comment. He even managed to wave and "You're welcome" after she yelled out, "THANK YOU!" and raced away. Becky always found a way to greet him every day after that before he left for his evening walk -- often laughing and clapping at the things he'd say.

As far as the Lawn Chair Brigade were concerned, the fact that none of their children found his demeanor gruff or him insulting was proof he was up to no good. That kinda "grooming" behavior was what every "stranger danger" kid's program they'd ever seen or heard said to watch out for.

"BECKY!" Sue screamed one evening a month into their vigilance. She happened to stand up and see the old man, the Minotaur at the end of the street with Becky standing on the corner. He was pointing back their way and saying something, but Becky was shaking her head no. She'd never seen Becky wander that far up the street before and it scared Sue to see her standing with the Minotaur that far away, giggling at whatever he

was saying. Sue was having none of it. "BECKY! YOU NEED TO COME HOME RIGHT NOW!" she yelled.

Becky looked confused but came running back, holding her soccer ball, to see what her momma wanted. The old man, the Minotaur, gave Sue one of his stern looks, turned and continued his walk.

"We don't *KNOW* this man, y'all. Not at all!" Sue complained. "He could be dangerous. He could be a sicko. I don't want him anywhere near my daughter. I've told her as much and that she is to stay as far away from him at all times till I say so! He could be a wanted man!"

No one knew if Sue was right about him necessarily, but everyone understood her fears and precaution. They all felt them. And the ball incident with Becky had begun to change everyone's mind. A man who was nice to little girls, but grumpy with everyone else, was not right.

"Look, y'all," Sansa said. "I'm not saying I'm an expert or anything, but I took a behavioral psych class and I remember the teacher explaining that a person's demeanor tends to be a projection of their inner life and is a good barometer of their intentions."

"Now what does that mean?" Sue asked. "What are you saying?"

"Well, the way a person acts reflects their motivations, I guess. Meaning, if our grumpy neighbor acts like he wants to be alone, then maybe he just feels alone inside. It doesn't make him a serial killer or anything. He just may need our understanding more than suspicions. We don't really know what he's been through to make him so isolative."

"It don't matter what pop psychology you come up with," Sue spat back. "The facts are the facts, y'all. And the fact is, he's about as unfriendly as a rattlesnake and way too

friendly with my daughter. I don't care what his Freud issues are, I care what he do! Y'all can see it plain as on his face."

"Them detective shows is always talkin' about why someone gets murdered or, you know, R-A-P-E-D," Mary Beth spelled. "And there's always a witness who was, like, afraid and didn't say nothing. I'm with Sue. We need to do something."

"Shocker," said Sansa.

"I can check the sex offender websites," Celia said. "Did your cousin ever get back to you, Karen? The Sheriff's deputy?"

"No, he said he checked and the guy was clean," Karen replied. "But he also said that don't necessarily mean nothing. It just means he ain't wanted at the moment. He said a lot of criminals don't really get caught until like the fifth or sixth time they've done a crime. But they always act like it was their first time."

"Well, did he say what we should do?"

"He said not to ignore anything. If we see something, we should report it to the local police. He said sometimes criminals will move to other areas that don't know them and start up again. And no one will really know till they get caught cause none of the cops in the new area know them yet."

"Sounds like we need to do something," Sue said, "is what it sounds like to me. I don't have a good feeling about this guy at all."

It didn't take long for the problem to bring itself to a tipping point. When their worst fear reared its ugly head. One week later, Becky disappeared in broad daylight from their cul-de-sac. Something that'd never happened before. On Saturday afternoon just as the Lawn Chair Brigade was assembling.

It was an average, sunny Saturday, cooler thanks to the time of year, but more than nice enough to have a dozen kids running around. The older boys were playing baseball in the street, their younger brothers and sisters playing a game of tag throughout the yards, and Audrey Severs was hosting a doll party on her front porch. Becky was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh my God! Oh my God! She’s gone!” Sue worried aloud in a panic after returning from refilling her white wine spritzer and finding Becky wasn’t in her room coloring like she said. “I looked everywhere and she’s nowhere to be found. You know she wouldn’t leave the house without telling me, y’all! He has her! I’m sure of it. We need to go over there and break down his door! He might have her in there right now! We need to save my little girl!”

“Who has her?” Sansa asked.

“Him,” Sue cried pointing toward the Lollipop house. “I just know it!”

“I saw Becky in the street near his place not five minutes ago,” said Mary Beth, “She just ran past us with her soccer ball when you were still inside.”

“Is that her soccer ball over there?” Karen asked.

“DALE!” Celia yelled out. “PICK UP THAT SOCCER BALL THERE! WHO’S NAME’S WRITTEN ON IT?”

Dale, who’d been sitting in his own front yard with Roy and Miles, drinking Pabst and talking about the Cowboy’s game tomorrow, walked to the front gutter and picked it up. “SAYS PROPERTY OF BECKY SMALLS.”

No one knew what to say next. Had Sue been right all along and the worst happened because no one had acted?

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my GOD!” Sue screamed.

“Hold on, Sue. Let’s get the boys out of their chairs and have everyone start looking around,” Sansa spoke. “Becky’s sure to be around here somewhere. Let’s not jump to any conclusions.”

“I’ve called the police, Sue,” Mary Beth said, “They should be here any second.”

“And I just told my son Jason to go find Becky right now,” Janice added. “He won’t quit till we’ve found her.”

“Oh my God! You’re not listening. I have to do something. She’s in there. He’s got her! I need to go over there and get her back! She’s my baby and he has her.”

The Lawn Chair Brigade stood and moved toward the Lollipop driveway. Staring down the narrow path to the house and wondering just how to storm it. Janice pulled Roy aside and told him, Miles, and Dale what was going on.

“Sumbitch,” Roy spoke, “Are you sure he has her? Sumbitch!” Which was echoed by Miles and Dale as they prepared to march up to the Lollipop house if Roy did. Luckily, the police arrived quickly and no one had to make the decision whether to storm the house or not.

After being filled in about Becky’s disappearance and Sue’s suspicions, the responding police officer, Officer Jeff Almquist replied, “Right! Yes, ma’am. We’ll check it out.”

No one moved. Everyone watched as Officer Almquist and his partner walk down the driveway and right up to the Lollipop door, knocking hard, as only cops tend to do.

The old man, the Minotaur, was home and opened the door. But no one expected to see the way the police reacted when the Minotaur answered the door. They smiled in surprised recognition. Big and genuine smiles. And he smiled widely in return.

“Hey, Bob,” Officer Almquist said in surprise. “What are you doing here? You visiting someone?”

“Hi, Jeff. No, I moved here just a bit ago. Not too long after the funeral. You know, make a change and all. What’s up? What’re you doing out this way? You wanna come in?”

“Sure. But I got to let you know. Sorry to do this, Bob, but this is a formal contact if you can believe that. The neighbors called. Would you mind stepping out here a second and standing by with my partner?” Officer Almquist introduced his partner. “Bob, this is Officer Bayles. Tom Bayles. He’s new. Only been with the force about two years now. I don’t think you’ve met him yet, but he was at the funeral.” Officer Almquist then turned to Officer Bayles, “Tom, this is Bob. You know Bob from the department. He retired after his...well, after the funeral. I’m sure you met him. Bob was a detective up in Investigations when you started though, so you may not have crossed paths too often.”

“Yeah, I recognize him. I seen your photos in the hallway outside the locker room - including that one in the paper when you took down that stolen car ring guy. Hi Bob. Sorry ‘bout this, but if you’ll stand over here with me, I’d appreciate it. You aren’t holding any weapons on you now are you, sir?”

“No,” Bob replied as he stepped outside looking confused. Then he noticed all us neighbors gathered on the sidewalk at the end of the driveway staring over at him and that intimidatingly angry look dropped down over his face.

Sansa shivered. Janice, Karen, and Celia averted their gaze. Mary Beth nearly peed her pants feeling faint all of a sudden. The men started toeing the ground. Only Sue stared right back.

“Is everything okay, Jeff?”



"I need to look inside your place, Bob. Is that okay with you? I know it's an imposition but I'm gonna ask you to trust me. Give me a few minutes of your trust and I'll explain everything after. Sorry to put you out like this."

"Okay, Jeff, sure. If you say so. I trust you. Go ahead."

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," Sue whispered.

No one admitted it, but everyone was thinking the same. But what happened next confused the Lawn Chair Brigade further and took a few moments to adjust to.

"Mommie? Why are the police at Mr. Vega's house?" Becky asked as she walked up with Jason, Janice's son.

Jason explained, "I caught up with her down at Bowie's mini mart on the corner. She said she was buying a diet coke because you were out and she wanted to make sure you had one for your dinner."

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!" Sue cried out as she grabbed Becky in a bear hug and started crying.

Her crying caught both Bob and Officer Bayle's attention. "Hey Jeff!" Officer Bayle's called into the house. "Come out here a sec. I think the kid has returned."

Officer Almquist walked out and looked over at Sue hugging Becky. "Stay here a minute will ya. I'll be right back."

He walked up the driveway to them. "I take it this is your daughter? The one you feared was missing?"

"Yes," Sue replied.

"And you're okay little girl?"

"Yes," Becky replied.

“Did you go somewhere you weren’t supposed to?”

Jason interjected, “She was just down at Bowie’s on Tate St, sir, buying a diet coke.”

“That right?” Officer Almquist asked Becky.

“Yes, sir,” Becky replied. “I was just buying a soda pop for my Momma cause we didn’t have none in the house. I only took the money from her purse cause she said it was okay to if I ever needed to. I wasn’t stealing it, I promise. Am I going to jail?”

“No, darling, you’re not. You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re a good girl to do something nice for your momma like that.” Officer Almquist nodded his head at the neighbors, and at Sue. “I would say this solves the mystery.”

When none of the neighbors replied, Officer Almquist spoke, “Look folks. I’m gonna tell you I know Bob and he’s a real good man. A true hero. He wouldn’t want me talking about him like this, but I think y’all need to hear. He’s retired police and used to work the real hard cases involving child abductions, rapes, and that sort. Saw far too many bad things and it stayed with him. But I tell you this, the last thing he’d ever do is hurt a kid. Even if his life depended on it. And don’t let on about this either, but he just lost his entire family last year. His wife, his adult children, even his grandchildren. They’d all taken a family vacation to Europe, but he stayed behind to work a really bad case involving the death of a ten year old girl whose step-daddy was lying about how it happened. Then the plane carrying his family crashed coming back over the Atlantic and they all died. The whole plane in fact and Bob took it pretty hard. He retired just after the funeral.” Here Officer Almquist started walking away but turned back.

“Look, y’all don’t have to listen to me none. But whatever you’re thinking about Bob, it ain’t so. He’s just had it hard for a while and no one’s been able to reach him. He’s “given at the office and then some” as they say. Still, it’s none of my business, but y’all

should give him a break. He deserves every inch of your respect and patience for the way he protected and served. You understand?"

Officer Almquist returned to Officer Bayles who was standing by chatting with "Bob." Bob Vega. Retired police. Detective twice decorated.

"Bob Vega," Becky said out loud. "Like Viva Las Vegas, Mommie. *Viva Las Vegas*," Becky giggled doing a nine year old version of an Elvis impersonation.

"What was that, honey?" Sue asked.

"That's what Mr. Vega said his name was. He said it was Bob Vega, like Viva Las Vegas, only he sounded like the *real* Elvis when he said it. Like on your records. It was very funny."

"Oh," was all Sue said.

After Officer Almquist returned to the Lollipop house, the Lawn Chair Brigade drifted back to Sue's driveway. But no one seemed to have anything else to say. And no one seemed comfortable. So they drifted back to their own homes pretending they had chores to do, or a call they just remembered they had to make, or a show they'd been wanting to see.

Most were still watching out their windows when the police car left the Lollipop house thirty minutes later and drove down Dura Court. Sue, who was still standing in her driveway, looked up into the sky and noticed the sunny day had started to cloud over.

No one was in Sue's driveway when Bob took his walk that evening and the kid's noticed Bob didn't say hi or stop to talk.

Over the next week, the Lawn Chair Brigade didn't see Bob coming or going from the Lollipop house. He didn't leave for donuts in the morning nor for his walk in the evening. He didn't check his mail, pick up anyone's spilled garbage, or talk to anyone's

kid. Sue reported his curtains stayed closed day and night all week and that he didn't even seem to be home. Though no one had seen him leave.

"Maybe he took a vacation?" Janice suggested.

"Could be," Sansa replied, "But there's been lights on in his place at night that go off in the day. At least as far as I can tell from my second floor bathroom window."

"Maybe the lights are on a timer?" Celia thought.

"He's probably feeling guilty, y'all," Sue said. "And a little scared. Cause we almost caught him. He knows we're watching him now."

"But he didn't do anything Sue. Didn't you hear what the officer said about him? His family and all," Sansa replied. "And that he was a decorated police officer? What would he have to feel guilty about?"

"I just watched a Date Line News show last night that said people who do bad things in life, crimes and such, get away with it for so long because they mask their behaviors in legitimate looking jobs. That's how they fool all the people around them. They cover it up with their job, but still are able to do bad things," Sue insisted. "Did you watch that Date Line, Mary Beth?"

"No, Sue, I didn't. I was watching Saved by an Angel last night. I don't like watching those kind of news shows."

"Well, how about you, Celia? How about you, Karen? Y'all know the show I'm talking about."

"Sorry, Sue," Celia replied, "Dale and I stayed up late last night talking. We're thinking about taking the kids to Disney World on vacation over in Florida this summer. In fact, we were gonna ask Karen and Miles if they wanted to go with us this year too. Karen?"

“Sure, Cellie,” Karen said, “why don’t we go back to my place and we can work out the calendar and travel days.”

“Sounds good. If y’all will excuse us. We’ll catch up with y’all later.”

After Karen and Celia left, Sansa, Mary Beth, and even Janice all found reasons to return to their own homes. Sue, a little ruffled at having the afternoon to herself, sat a bit longer in the driveway, under the shady Red Oak, drinking the last of her white wine spritzer and staring at the Lollipop house driveway. She had a dour look on her face and felt an uneasy confusion.

On the following Saturday morning, early, with most of the neighborhood decorated for Halloween, and many of the neighborhood kids busy putting the final touches on their costumes for the evening’s trick or treating, and a few teenagers from the JV football team figuring out the best game plan for the night, a moving truck rolled onto the cul-de-sac. The neighbors watched as the All My Sons Moving & Storage van pulled to the end of the cul-de-sac, turned around, and backed up to the Lollipop’s narrow driveway. Then, for the next two hours, two big burly men walked up and down the driveway, back and forth from the Lollipop house carrying furniture and boxes. When the truck was all loaded, they closed it up and drove away.

At noon, a less than happy real estate agent from Keller Williams showed up to post a “For Sale” sign in front of the Lollipop house before leaving for another open house.

At two, the Lawn Chair Brigade, having stayed indoors for the day, caught a brief glimpse of Bob as he drove his black Ford F150 out of the garage, down the narrow driveway, and away from the Lollipop house. He looked right and left, back and forth, rolling slowly in case of children, till he reached the end of the cul-de-sac. Then he turned right and drove away.

The Rebel Lawn Chair Brigade didn't meet that evening. They hadn't really met much all week and weren't sure about the next, what with busy schedules and all. But each of them did receive a post card in each of their mailboxes.

The handwritten postcards read, "In a throwaway world, God wants us to know that He hates it when we throw people away. Let's not! Let's call each other to God's standards; to God's holiness. Let's not let our spirits be corrupted by suspicion and resentment. Let's not break faith with God by treating those closest to us with contempt. And in a world where people get broken by death, by sin, by terrible experiences, let's find them, include them and bring them home to God's family for healing. Remember His Love that saved you."

No one could say if the message was meant as an accusation or a confession. But they all knew who the message was from and that it was deserved. They'd not really done right by the Minotaur. And though each neighbor held a different interpretation of what transpired between them all – each felt a similar guilt and hopefulness, that Bob would no longer suffer and find a way through. They never knew if he thought about them in the same light – or if he understood just how truly enigmatic a person he was. But they would understand if he didn't. It was never easy to walk in another person's shoes when you had your own troubles to carry. Everyone wants to be better people but few understand it's all too human not to be.

Sansa was most affected and kept her postcard tacked to the bathroom wall next to her mirror for a very long time so she could see it every morning and evening. It reminded her of her responsibility to this world. And every time she looked out on the Lollipop house, she promised herself to make the world a better place, even if only by the little choices she could make.

Sue was angry and immediately tore her postcard up after barely reading it once. How dare this man lecture her! After all, what could such a terrible person know? About her or anyone? She determined to put him from her mind and move forward. Though some could argue, his message stayed with her the longest.

The End.