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Burning Bridges as We Go
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The Dura Mesa Misunderstanding

He didn't smile. Which made him appear ill-tempered and gruff. And more than a bit suspicious to the ladies of Dura Mesa cul-de-sac. Very off putting. Because no one in Justin, Texas, not anyone decent they knew, had ever refused to smile and wave at a neighbor – not heading off to church or shopping at the Piggly Wiggly or standing on Main St talking crops and weather. And certainly never in their own neighborhood on their very own street. Not if they were Texan and had any good sense.

Sue was the first to call it out, as was her prerogative being the host driveway they most often gathered around each Saturday evening – sitting under her big, shady Red Oak tree to drink their Pabst Blue Ribbons and Buttery chardonnays while simultaneously keeping an eye out for their kids playing outside.

"The man is a *beast* is what I'm saying, y'all," Sue argued. "*Nothing more than a low down, dirt eating beast of the field.* I mean who doesn't have the sense God gave Adam if he cain't smile back when greeted by his neighbors? His mamma definitely didn't raise him right, that's for sure."

All the ladies of Dura Mesa who lined their folding chairs on the diagonal across Sue's driveway agreed. They were a chorus line no more than four feet away when the man passed by for his evening walk. And they called out, '*How do, neighbor*' in the most polite of voices, but the man barely glanced their way, turning slightly to rake his eyes

across the gathering, before continuing on his way without so much as a *'how do'* in return. Just looked ahead and kept walking.

The effect was unexpectedly shocking. Almost like a sharp rebuke. No one spoke for several moments.

"Did he hear us? Maybe he didn't hear us?" Mary Beth suggested. "He looks old. Maybe he's deaf?"

"He heard us."

"Maybe he's divorced and bitter, y'all," suggested Janice. "Could be. My Daddy's first cousin, June, was like that. Got divorced and decided he didn't like women no more so he refused to speak to any of us. Course he moved out of Texas after that."

"Being bitter or divorced don't give anyone an excuse to be rude."

"Maybe he didn't hear us. I mean he wouldn't just be rude is all I'm saying. Especially if he heard us," Mary Beth whined. "There'd be no reason."

To the ladies of the Duro Mesa cul-de-sac -- Sue, Mary Beth, Janice, Sansa, Betty, and Maggie May, being ill-mannered was the equivalent to a mortal sin.

"He only been here three days," Maggie May suggested. "Maybe he's still settling in and not sure of himself. He's a big fella too. Not bad looking, mind you, but his size probably makes him not very sociable. Who knows."

Their new neighbor was oversized actually. Big and imposing – a mountain of a man standing easily six foot six with a large head and a stooped gait pulled slightly down by gravity. His arms were heavily muscled too, hanging low, ending in gnarled hands that looked like they could tear muscle right from the bone. And his piercing blue eyes, deep set in his face, scanned everything side to side, always scanning, which could feel disconcerting if they roamed across you. Along with the way he held his square jowls

clenched, mouth grim in a straight line, and head tilted to the side -- he gave off the impression he was listening, but not happy with what he was hearing. And it got worse. More disturbing when they realized how surprisingly fast he moved -- like a Greek Minotaur stalking his labyrinth -- the impression being if he wanted to catch you, he could. And would turn you into mincemeat once he got you in his grasp.

"I don't understand why he just cain't say 'howdy?'" Mary Beth continued. "It don't take much to nod your head. Even Tony the Mailman nods whenever he drops off catalogs and letters and such. And he's Italian. But still, you look at him and he nods and calls out hello."

"Maybe this guy's sick and don't feel well?" Sansa posited.

"And still goes for a walk in the evening?" countered Sue. "I don't think so."

"Well, it's just curious how he don't smile or say hello is all I'm sayin," Mary Beth finished. "You don't think he's a Yankee do you? From New York or someplace up north? I hear they don't have very decent manners up there no how. They just curse at you and call you names right to your face."

"Where'd you hear that from? One of your reality tv shows?" Maggie May asked.

"No, from Betty. She and her beau, Jackson, went up to New York to see the Statue of Liberty last summer cause of Jackson's older brother lives up there now. He's a stage director and gay and all, but Betty says he's still good people. But she said all those people in Manhattan don't even talk to each other. And if you talk to them, they just be rude right to your face. Betty said she had a hell of a time keeping Jackson from punching nearly every street vendor they come across when they walked down Broadway to go see the Statue of Liberty."

“No, he ain’t no Yankee, though he do act like one a bit. Which is sayin’ something,” Sue commented. “But he’s Texan for sure. Y’all didn’t happen to notice the Texas flag tattooed on his forearm along with the Army Ranger insignia on the other? My daddy had those. Just like that. And he weren’t no picnic neither.” Sue prided herself on being observant and knowing what went on with others. She felt it her duty to protect the neighborhood against those who might cause trouble in their nice cul-de-sac. And had already spent the better part of the last three days closely observing their new neighbor come and go from his new residence – the locally nicknamed “Lollipop” house.

No one believed the old Lollipop house would ever sell before it finally did. It’d been empty for at least a decade, since the previous owner died. Elroy, who’d been an ancient bachelor from the Texas dustpan era and once owned all the acreage their houses were built on. He never had family and lived alone, but still found time to be nice to his neighbors even if he was too old to join them for their barbeques and Christmas parties. When he passed away, they learned Elroy’d sold off most all his property except the cottage he lived in to pay back taxes. And rumor had it Sansa’s husband, Charlie, was secretly trying to buy the Lollipop house to turn into a mother-in-law unit, but ran into an overly tangled amount of legal issues thanks to whatever easements Elroy had come up with. So Charlie gave up on the place. Which let it remain empty for the longest time till a week ago when summer had finally given way to fall and fall began decaying what summer had burnt. Their new neighbor arrived, escorted by a young, exuberant Keller Williams real estate agent, and the ladies watched as the agent turned over the keys, shook the man’s hand, and practically skipped back to his Oldsmobile sedan throwing the ‘*For sale*’ sign into his trunk. And in the process set the neighborhood speculating over just who had purchased the Lollipop house.

“He lives alone as far as I can tell,” speculated Janice, Sue’s congenial second in command and low key rival. “Be surprised if there’s any family comin’ around cause that place is way too small for anything but one person – especially if that person is on the bigger side. Which he surely is. Don’t know how that man’s gonna manage. Me and Roy walked through the place years ago when they had that last open house. Y’all remember that? We walked through and y’all wouldn’t believe how small the place is. Much smaller than it looks from the outside, I tell you what. Even Roy joked he couldn’t fit in the bathtub if he wanted and would have to use it as a ba-day instead.”

“In all fairness, Roy cain’t fit in none of our bathtubs.” Sue laughed, “The poor man’s gained near a hundred pounds since the last of your babies. Course he did tell Abe you’re the best cook in all of Langtry County and was surprised he didn’t weigh a hundred more. Not from lack of trying, he said. So I guess there’s that.”

“Well, bless your heart, Sue. My Roy has always been a man of appetites,” Janice smiled without being offended. “My mama always said a man’s *hunger* may come from his jimmy, but his *real love* is won through his stomach. Didn’t your Mama ever teach you that, Sue? That and how keeping a husband well fed makes ‘em happy and keeps ‘em off your backside for a while, if you know what I mean. Which helps if you don’t want no more babies, which I don’t. Five be plenty for sure.”

“Sadly, I married a different kinda Texan. He don’t sit still long enough to eat, let alone have *appetites*. One child was all we managed. And her barely. But I don’t mind cause he’s a good provider and makes good money – which I get most of to pay the bills and manage the household and send off to all my charities. And he is a good man in his own right. Course, it’d be nice if he’d remember our anniversary every once in a while. Or his daughter’s birthday. But his work keeps him pretty busy travelling to Tampa and Chicago and whatever damn place his company needs him next. Hell, the man’s

gone so much, I doubt he even remembers his only child's name. But we all have burdens to carry, I suppose."

"Well, bless his heart too," Janice offered, sincerely taking Sue's hand. She didn't mention the gossip that Sue's husband was also having regular affairs on his travels. Her own husband all but confirmed the fact after their last Christmas party.

"Yes, indeed," Sue replied. "Bless his heart. That and kiss my housekeeping, no cooking, one-baby ass while he's at it!"

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

Actually, all the Dura Mesa neighbors were fairly good friends, each having lived on the street for more than a decade. This was their home, is how they saw it -- an extension of having been born and raised within the very same county in the best state of the greatest country all their lives. It was a Texas neighborhood worth keeping so.

"I feel kinda bad for our new neighbor, y'all," Sansa spoke up. "Y'all can see how narrow his driveway is. It's barely a bike path. And there ain't even a garage at the end of it. Not to mention how it sits in the middle of four properties with barely an arm's reach between the others. I know if I lived there I'd feel like I was living in a fishbowl. He don't even have curtains put up and you can see all the way into his entire place from my second floor bathroom window, y'all. Shameful!"

"Well, I at least hope he has the good enough common sense to put out a bowl of candy at the end of his driveway for Halloween this year," Maggie May mentioned.

"Otherwise he's gonna have some problems with them new JV freshman football players. Miles says the new freshman quarterback just transferred up from Corpus Christi this year is a bit of a rebel mess. And he has all the JV freshman pumped up and foolish enough to go out this Halloween looking to cause some mischief. Miles says

they've had their hands full just instillin' a little discipline into this new batch and that they're all holy terrors. But he's got a plan. He's gonna stay home with a bullhorn and the hose turned on to spray them just in case they get too close to our place. Just to be on the safe side, you know, because neither of us want to be spending another year cleaning up raw eggs and toilet paper and smashed pumpkins all over the street."

Sansa chimed in. "Well Charlie will probably be foolish enough to try to join them. Hell, when he heard there was a new man moved into the Lollipop house, he 'bout jumped outta his Barca Lounger to go greet the man and drag him off to Sears. I told him to let the poor man settle before he and his friends go bothering that man about what kinda lawn mower he owns or what kinda barbeque he sports or what golf clubs he strikes. The place don't even have big enough space for a barbeque no how. And he don't need to be keeping up with the Jones. But, y'all know Charlie. He always determined to be sociable if it involves any gathering of menfolk."

"I can tell you this about our new neighbor," Sue jumped in intending to refocus the conversation, "No one else comes or goes from that place except him. He leaves every morning just after nine, probably to go over to Dunkin Donuts on Marcum like all the other old men, to read his paper and drink coffee. And he don't come back till two at least -- always carrying takeout delivery from Roscoe's Chicken up the street and always with one of them plain brown paper bags like they get over from Bowie Liquor on the corner. And y'all know what's inside that bag too. Glug-glug-glug," Sue mimes lifting her pinkie and drinking from an imaginary bottle.

"It don't have to mean that," Sansa said. "The brown paper bag thing. And even if it do, he's an adult. I imagine he can take a drink if he wants to if -- if it don't hurt nobody. Charlie and I like to take a drink every once in a while. Unless it's a Sunday, of course."

“Poor man,” Mary Beth said. “If he’s all alone in there, he probably don’t even have anyone to serve him by plate and fork. That’s sad. I hate to think he’s eating chicken right outta the bag and drinks straight from the bottle. Why I’d be ashamed if my own Miles did anything like that.”

“Yeah well,” Sue replied, “it don’t bode well for a man to drink alone no how. It says something. And 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 used to call a “snoop” – though she didn’t see it that way. “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 gave us the old “stink-eye” when he passed by I mind. And have y’all noticed he don’t say boo to us, but he stopped and chatted up the kids playing up the street when they called over to him? What’s up with that?”

“He was just retrieving their ball. I don’t think he was talking to them.”

“Now that you mention it, I did notice how peculiar he was to do that,” Sue said. “Why just two days ago, I saw him stop and say something to Audrey Severs on this very corner when she was hula hooping. He stopped and said something and she laughed. Then he smiled back at her and walked on.”

“He did not.”

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

“Well, Audrey is pretty cute.”

“That’s what I mean. What kind of a grown man stops to talk with a little girl not his own? Let alone smile at her? You know it gave me a sour feeling right in the pit of my stomach.”

"Maybe he's a granddaddy?" Mary Beth chimed in, rubbing her arm. She was uncomfortable with what Sue was insinuating -- it subconsciously struck a nerve a little too close to home for her. Though none of the other ladies knew that.

"There's more," Sue continued. "Y'all know Tony the Mailman, right? Well, Tony told me he started delivering to the Lollipop house right away cause the man already had mail waiting for him."

"What kinda mail?"

"Cabela catalogs and Sears's mailers and such, but he also dropped off three magazines for the man. All special ordered -- The Atlantic, Highlight Kids, and The New York Times Sunday edition."

"That's not unusual," Sansa commented. "Getting the mail. We all get mail too. Including Highlight Kids. We get that. Not the New York Times though."

"I didn't know you could even do that. Get a newspaper from another state," said Mary Beth. "We don't get magazines either except hunting and fishing ones. And I get People. But Robert thinks those other wordy magazines you mentioned are too liberal and probably written by communists."

"I know," Maggie May added, "Dale is the same way. If he finds out our new neighbor is getting Yankee magazines and newspapers, he'll think the guy is a commie too. Or gay or something worse. Like a democrat."

"Not that part," Sue interrupted. "Tony says this guy hasn't gotten any personal letters to the house. 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. He's already delivered the magazines and, get this, four legal documents to the Lollipop house."

"How does he know they're legal documents?"

“Cause they have to be signed for before Tony can turn them over. It’s all legal and registered. Tony said two of them were from the Granbury Police Department and two from the Lancaster District Attorney’s Office. How do you like that! No mail, gets a Yankee newspaper, commie magazines and legal notices from the police? Don’t y’all think that’s odd? Hell, more than odd. That’s suspicious.”

“Not necessarily,” Sansa replied. “Why would that be odd? I mean Charlie and I get the newspaper. And I also get Highlight Kids for the girls, just like most of y’all. And sometimes we get jury duty notices. Course, I don’t get the New York Times, but I did know a couple of girls in college who read it. True they were Yankees and not from Texas, but still. It’s not like he’s waving a red flag in front of a bull or anything like that.”

“I don’t know,” Sue replied. “He lives all alone and he gets a kid’s magazine? Not to mention legal notices from law enforcement. And we don’t know nothing about this guy since he moved in. He don’t say boo to us, but he stops to talk to our children? I’m starting to get a real bad picture here.”

“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? He’s pretty old.”

“Then why buy such a small place?” Sue reasoned. “Plus, there ain’t no woman living who’d choose that place for her and a husband to live in. And I doubt he has kids or grandkids. It’s in the eyes. I can tell you that just by looking at the man.”

“I have to admit,” Janice replied looking concerned, “it all do sound suspicious, y’all. I mean, for all we know, he could be one of them sex offender child molesters.”

"Don't they have to notify the neighbors if they move into your neighborhood?"

Maggie May spoke, "I saw a Dateline once and those guys have to register with the police...."

"He received several notices from the police!" Sue interrupted. "And from the DA's office. Those are legal notices, y'all."

"Oh my Lord in heaven," Mary Beth exclaimed clutching her cross necklace.

"Let's not go wild here with speculation," Sansa said. "We don't know that he's a creep for certain. Maybe he's just a private guy new to the neighborhood. Shouldn't we give him a little benefit of the doubt before deciding he's an ax-murderer or worse?"

"Maybe he's in the witness protection program like on *CSI*," Mary Beth considered. "He could be something like that, right?"

"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 wrong about him. We can at least agree on that."

"I got a cousin," Maggie May said, "who's a deputy over in Fort Worth. 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 Tony what his full name is. It would be good to know as much as we can about him," Sue said. "For all we know, he could be really dangerous. That's what my mamma instinct says. Remember that lawn care guy, Pedro something or other, who drove around here that day trying to get work. Only he tried to steal several 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 wore a sign declaring himself a meth addict 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'm not saying you're wrong, Sue. Or that it wouldn't be a good idea to look into it, but I'm just thinking maybe we give this guy 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."

"How? He strike you as the friendly type? He's already ignored us. 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 a child to think about. And that man is way too unfriendly not to be all kinds of bad, y'all."

"The right thing to do is welcome him to the neighborhood," Janice insisted. "We ain't done that proper yet and it ain't right. I'll make him my shepherd's pie and head over Monday with Roy to introduce ourselves. Then we can see what he's really like. I suggest y'all do the same this week."

"Well, I have lasagna planned for this week. Don't hurt to make a little extra," Sansa added. "Charlie and I will head over Tuesday."

"Robert and I can take Wednesday. And I'll let Betty know so she and Jackson can take Thursday."

"Alright, Dale and I'll take Friday. That should cover it, right?"

"Well, ladies, I think we have a consensus. But don't be surprised if the man acts like a *beast*. I know unfriendly and he sits right in the center."

The new neighbor could've been many things to the ladies of Dura Mesa, but Sue was right about friendly not being one of them. He didn't give them the time of day. Except where children were concerned. Come some kid playing in the street and he seemed to have no trouble stopping to chat. But he had almost no patience for adults. Over the next week, as each lady made the effort to welcome their new neighborhood with casseroles and company, bringing their husbands along for formal introductions, the man greeted them well enough but never asked them in. He thanked them for their visits and the food and promised, once he got settled, he'd come join them for their next neighborhood barbeque. But not today. He had too much to do and not enough time to do it in. He thanked them again before firmly closing the door on each of them. And that sealed his fate.

None of the ladies liked it. Nor him for it. No one appreciated being rebuffed.

Except he could be thoughtful at times. Like picking up the trash in front of Janice's house one morning after the garbage trucks scattered soiled baby diapers, old milk cartons, and used fast food wrappers into the street. Or returning delivery packages to Sansa's immediately, all nice and stacked up on her front porch, after they'd been dropped off at his place by mistake. And even pulling a few extra weeds from the sidewalk flowerbeds in front of Sue's place cause it needed to be done and her husband hadn't.

And then there were the children. Somehow, out of the dozen or so who played around the neighborhood, none seemed scared of him. On Tuesday, he stopped to play street football with several of the boys. On Wednesday, they saw him take a turn holding the jump rope for Saddle and her friends who were practicing double dutch on the sidewalk in front of Betty's place. And Thursday, he briefly played tag with the little ones running and hiding in Maggie May's yard. 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 she claimed the other kids were “boring.” Who really didn’t prefer to associate with any kids her own age and, as such, was considered an “odd duck.” She really seemed to like the man the most. Especially after she accidentally kicked a ball that hit him in the back of the head as he walked by. She stood frozen, too afraid to move, thinking he was about to turn and yell at her for being “careless” like her father might do. But all the man 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 respond, *‘you’re welcome’* when Becky finally yelled, “*THANK YOU!*” and raced away. Becky always found a way to greet him every day after that when he left for his evening walk -- often laughing and clapping at the things he’d say.

As far as the women were concerned, the fact that none of their children found his gruff demeanor insulting was proof he was up to no good. That kind of “grooming” behavior was what every “stranger danger” kid’s program had ever said to be vigilant over.

“BECKY!” Sue whistled and yelled the following Saturday. She happened to look up and see the old man standing at the end of the street with Becky. 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 their new neighbor 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 turned and came running back, holding her soccer ball, to see what her momma wanted. The old man gave Sue a stern look, turned and continued his walk.

“I think we have a serious problem, y’all.” Sue complained. “I don’t like what this man is doing. He’s rude to us, but he always trying to hang out with our kids? 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!"

All the ladies understood Sue's fears and precaution. They were starting to feel them too. The latest ball incident with Becky had changed everyone's mind. A man who was nice to little girls, but grumpy with everyone else, was not right.

"Look, y'all," Janice said. "I'm not saying I'm an expert or anything, but I took a psych class in college and I remember the teacher saying actions reflect behavior of intent."

"Now what does that mean?" Sue asked. "What are y'all saying?"

"Well, what a person do reflects what they mean to do or something like that."

"What he do? The facts are he's about as unfriendly as a rattlesnake to us and way too friendly with my daughter. Y'all can see that plain as day. That'd what he do!"

"I can still call my cousin, Donnie, like I said," Mary Beth. "He'll be on duty tonight. He can run a background check."

"I can check the sex offender websites," Janice said. "See if he's on any of them."

"I can have my boys start walking Becky around. To and from school and walk her home," Sansa added. "They won't mind. Tommy's working for his citizenship badge with the Boy Scouts this fall. And James will do whatever Tommy does, so you're set."

"Thank you, ladies. That's a start, but I think we need to figure a way to get this man out of our neighborhood. I don't have a good feeling about this guy at all."

All the ladies of Dura Mesa agreed.

And as happens on occasion, serendipity came to Mesa Dura Court not even a week later. A tipping point confirming the worst fears reared its ugly head. After a week of ignoring her Mom's advice and chatting up the old man each day he walked, Becky

disappeared in broad daylight from their cul-de-sac on Saturday afternoon. Dozens of neighborhood kids were playing outside, per usual, with versions of dolls, jump rope, tag, and such occupying several sidewalks and lawns -- while a full blown street football game was in full swing among the teenagers in the middle of the street. And as the early evening bloomed, the ladies gathered under Sue's shady Oak tree with each mother setting up her chair before searching out their children's location around the area. Once all were visible, they sat. Except Sue. She remained standing because Becky was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, where in the world is that girl?" Sue questioned looking around. I just came from the house and I know she wasn't in there.

"Maybe she went back in for a second to get something from her bedroom?"

"I'll tan that girl if she snuck back inside and didn't tell me. She knows better." Sue went back to the house, but a few minutes later returned panicked. "Oh my God! She's gone! I can't find Becky. She's not in the house or the back yard or out here. BECKY!!" Sue called out. "Becky SUE! If you can hear me, come home right this instant!"

Several kids looked over at Sue, and then around the neighborhood, but no one saw Becky.

Sue felt the ice dagger in her heart familiar to all parents when they can't account for their child's whereabouts. "Y'all know she wouldn't leave the street without telling me! Or be out of sight! But I don't see her anywhere."

"TOMMY!" Sansa yelled. "*Tommy Lee Merrill*, you stop what you're doing and answer me!"

Tommy stepped out from the football game and looked over at his mother. "Mom, I'm in the middle of a play, here."

"Tommy Lee, you get over here right now! And bring your brother."

"Yes, ma'am." Tommy replied, grabbing James and running over.

"Weren't you supposed to be watching out for Becky?"

"Yes, ma'am. We have been, honest. All day."

"Then where pray tell is she?"

"She's right over there on her porch where she been all morning," Tommy said pointing. But when he and the others looked over, they could plainly see the porch was empty and Becky not there. "Maybe she went back inside?"

"Her momma already checked inside. She ain't there. What do you have to say for yourselves, boys?"

"I seen her, Ms. Merrill," chimed in Dale Jr who'd wandered over from the game. "She was squatting on the sidewalk over there drawing with chalk and then the new neighbor man came by. He was walking by just a little while ago and they started kicking her soccer ball back and forth."

"Oh my Lord!" Sue yelled turning to the ladies. "Oh Lord, is that her soccer ball over there!?"

They all looked.

"Dale Jr, run over there and pick up that soccer ball to see whose name is written on it."

Dale sprinted over to the Lollipop driveway and picked up the ball. "SAYS PROPERTY OF BECKY SMALLS," he yelled back.

No one knew what to say next.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my GOD!” Sue panicked. “He has her! I knew he was no good. We need to get over to his place and break down the door! He might have her in there right now! We need to save my little girl!”

“Hold on, Sue. Let’s get the men 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. Boys go get your father and the others at our place. They’re watching college football in the living room.”

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

“And I just told Jason and the rest of the boys to search the neighborhood for Becky right now,” Maggie May added. “They 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.”

They all moved toward the Lollipop driveway with Sue. Staring down the narrow path to the house and wondering just how to storm it. When the men came outside, 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 and no one had to make the decision whether to storm the house or not.

Officer Almquist and his partner stepped from their patrol vehicle and were greeted by the neighborhood. Listening first, they were filled in about Becky’s disappearance and Sue’s suspicions, before replying, “Right! Yes, ma’am. We’ll check it out.”

No one moved. But everyone watched as Officer Almquist and his partner walked firmly up the driveway, right up to the Lollipop door and knocked hard, as only cops tend to do in their bang-bang-bang style.

The old man was home and came to the door. But no one expected to see the way the police reacted when he did. They smiled in surprised recognition. Big and genuine smiles. All of them. With the old man smiling widely in return.

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

“Hi, Jeff. No, I just moved here not too long ago.”

“I didn’t know that. I thought you still over at the ranch on Alamo.”

“No, I made a change after the funeral. I just couldn’t stay there any longer. Too many memories, you know. The place was always Jennie’s anyway. But that’s not why you’re here. What’s up? What’re you doing out this way?”

Officer Almquist took a deep breath. “Hey sorry about this, Bob, but I got to let you know we’re here on a formal contact. If you can believe that.” Here Officer Almquist looked back at the neighbors gathered, watching. “Your, umm, your new neighbors called. Would you mind stepping out here a second and standing by with my partner?” Officer Almquist then 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 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." Tom replied. Then to Bob, "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. 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 the neighbors gathered on the sidewalk at the end of his driveway watching and that intimidatingly angry look dropped down over his face again.

Sansa shivered. Janice, Betty, and Maggie May averted their gaze. Mary Beth nearly fainted feeling unusually sweaty all of a sudden. Even the men started toeing the ground and rubbing the back of their necks. Only the children frankly watched. And Sue just 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 time and I'll explain everything after. Sorry to put you out like this."

"Well, if you say so, Jeff, sure. I'll trust you, but this better be good. Go ahead. Door's open."

"Anyone else inside?"

"No. Why would there be?"

"Just a question. Be back in a second. Tom, you can stay here with Bob."

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

No one admitted it, but everyone was thinking the same. Still what happened next confused Sue and took everyone a few moments to adjust to.

“Mommie?” Becky asked walking up while holding Jason’s hand, “Why are those policeman at Mr. Vega’s house?”

When everyone looked at Jason, blinking their eyes in surprise, so Jason explained, “I caught up with Becky down at Bowie’s Mini Mart on the corner. She was buying diet coke because she said you were out and she wanted to make sure her momma had some for dinner.”

“Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!” Sue cried out grabbing Becky in a bear hug and starting to cry.

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 down the driveway to them. “I take it this is your daughter?” he said gesturing to Becky. 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 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?”

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

"Yes, sir."

With that settled, Officer Almquist addressed the group. "Look folks. I'm gonna tell you all, 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 just a few years ago. His wife, his adult children, even his grandchildren. They were all set to take a big family vacation over to Europe, but Bob was working a really bad case involving the death of a ten year old girl whose step-daddy was lying about how it happened and he decided to stay behind till it was over. He didn't go to Europe with his family you see. And then the plane carrying his whole family crashed coming back over the Atlantic and they all died. Everyone. Bob took it pretty hard. He retired right 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. 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’s that, honey?” Sue asked trying to recover.

“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 neighbors drifted away quickly. No one seemed to have anything else to say. And no one felt 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 to a relative, 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 away. Sue, who was still standing in her driveway, looked up to the sky and noticed the sunny day had turned unusually cloudy, with dark rain approaching.

No one was in Sue’s driveway when Bob took his evening walk. And the kid’s noticed Bob didn’t say hi or stop to talk to any of them when he passed by. The street was oddly silent.

No one saw Bob coming or going from the Lollipop house after that evening either. Halloween arrived and they were all busy for a time. But as November rolled in, the ladies noticed he didn’t leave for donuts in the morning anymore nor his evening walks. He didn’t check his mail, pick up anyone’s spilled garbage, or talk to anyone’s kid. On the Saturday before Thanksgiving, Sansa reported curtains had finally been installed in every window, which now stayed closed day and night. She was no longer

able to see into the Lollipop house from her second floor bathroom. But despite this, she also didn't think the old man was even home most of the time anymore.

"Maybe he took a vacation?" Mary Beth suggested.

"Could be," Sansa replied, "But I still seen lights go on in his place at night that go off in the day."

"Could be a timer?" Maggie May thought aloud. "We used some of those when we went on vacation last year. They turn your lights and off on a schedule so people think you're at home."

"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," Janice replied. "They even said he was a decorated police officer. What would he have to feel guilty about?"

"You never know," Sue insisted. "If he weren't guilty of one thing, don't mean he ain't guilty of another. Else, why would he be hiding out in his house now? I ain't seen hide nor hare of him in some time. That's suspicious."

"No, Sue, it isn't," Janice cut in. "We need to stop thinking evil thoughts about that man just cause he ain't like us. I don't feel Christian when I do."

Sue didn't like her statements being rebuffed. "Well, how about you, Sansa? How about you, Maggie? Mary Beth? Y'all know what I'm talking about."

"You know," Maggie May said, "I just realized I might've left the stove on at my place. I think I'd better go check."

The ladies watched as Maggie May folded up her chair and left. Which took them by surprise.

“You know, I think I’m gonna head home too,” Janice said. “I’ve been meaning to try a new recipe for this dish called Beef Wellington for some time. It’s a bit complicated and today feels like a good day to try.”

“It’s still early,” Sue spoke back. “What’s your rush.”

“I think I want to surprise Roy when he gets back with the boys from their JV football game. It’s been a while since I did something nice for him and he ain’t never had Beef Wellington before. But we seen it on one of them chef shows and he mentioned he’d like to try it.” Janice picked up her chair, folded it and left. “I’ll see y’all later. Have a blessed evening.”

“You know,” Mary Beth spoke up watching Janice leave, “Dale’s been talking about taking the family on a trip to Disneyland over Christmas for a bit now and I’ve always held him off. I think I’m gonna surprise him and start planning a trip for Christmas this very afternoon.” Mary Beth stood gathering her chair and wine. “My apologies, y’all, but I’m gonna head home and call a travel agent.” Mary Beth left.

“You know, I think I’m gonna head home too,” Sansa said, standing and folding her chair. “I can’t remember the last time the whole family went to the movies together on a Saturday night. I’ll see you later Sue. Have a nice evening.”

“Well, okay, y’all,” Sue called out. “See y’all later.” She smiled, but it wasn’t sincere. If she was willing to admit it, she felt bothered – disappointed, a bit unsure of herself, and lonely all at the same time for their evening ending so quickly. She couldn’t remember the last time they hadn’t all sat together well into the night, drinking and talking. Saturday’s were their cul-de-sac time together. Still, Sue sat for a long time in her driveway staring across at the Lollipop house feeling like something had changed. It

had everything to do with that house. The Lollipop house. And the old man who'd arrived to throw the neighborhood balance off. Now everything felt wrong. *He scared us is what*, Sue thought. *And now everyone's afraid to hang out with that beast around.* Sue worked up her anger. And resentment. *Well, I won't let it happen! I'll make sure that man leaves so we can all feel safe and return to our nice peaceful neighborhood. If not me, then who?!*

After Thanksgiving, as December dawned and everyone began decorating their homes for Christmas, the women of Dura Mesa Court noticed four big burly men drive up in a large moving van and park at the end of the cul-de-sac. They extended the truck ramp down the Lollipop house driveway and began walking back and forth -- loading boxes and furniture onto the truck before returning for more. It didn't take long and, within ninety minutes, the truck was fully loaded and the men ready to drive away. A few minutes later, a less than happy real estate agent from Keller Williams showed up, walked through the house, and then waved the truck on. Before leaving, he re-posted a "For Sale" sign out front and climbed back in his own Oldsmobile, driving away after the moving van.

Curious, Sue went out to her mailbox to confirm what she was happy to discover -- the man had moved out! And since it had been more than a few Saturdays when she and the ladies sat the afternoon away in her driveway, Sue was looking forward to this afternoon. She'd asked the ladies over on previous Saturdays, but each made their apologies citing the busy holidays as reason for not being available. But each promised to come by soon.

Standing at her mailbox, Sue looked around with more hope than she'd allowed herself for a month -- smiling, per usual, at her neighbors and waving. And those outside who noticed her, smiled back and waved. As was the proper and polite thing to do. But instead of relieved, this made Sue feel more anxious and not as sure. It seemed like

everyone, though they smiled and waved back, weren't being sincere. Sue wondered if their friendship had ever been sincere or if it was just geographical proximity.

What did that old man do to us? she wondered.

Sue put her thoughts away as she pulled mail from the mailbox. And gasped when she noticed a postcard with the Texas flag stamped on the cover – a rare thing in her household since, despite his travels, her husband didn't send letters or cards when he was away – and realized the postcard was from the man. From Bob Vega. Addressed to her.

The card read:

*However hard a person looks,
Hard may have been his lot;
'Tis not for you nor me to tell,
So we will judge him not.*

*He may be ragged and forlorn,
Stern poverty may be his lot,
And still he may be worthy,
So we will judge him not.*

*We may soon be neglected and alone,
Hard may be our lot,
Then we should like a smile,
So we will judge him not.*

Let's go and speak a kindly word

*To cheer his weary lot,
That will be by far the best,
For God has said, "Judge not."*

"Now what in the Sam Hill does that mean?" Sue spoke aloud.

The End.