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This Old Man, He Played Five

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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 contentious to the ladies of the Dura Mesa cul-de-sac. Because no one in Justin, Texas, not anyone decent they knew, refused to smile or 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 in front of their very own homes. Not if they were Texan and had any God-given good sense.

Sue was the first to call it out, as was her prerogative being the host driveway the ladies most often gathered around each Saturday – sitting under her shady Red Oak tree drinking Pabst Blue Ribbons and Buttery chardonnays, and the occasional rum and coke when the occasion called for it.

"That man is *all hat and no saddle* is all I'm sayin'," Sue spat. "I mean who don't smile and say howdy when greeted by one's neighbors?"

All the ladies of Dura Mesa who placed 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 on his evening walk. And even though they called out brightly, '*How do, neighbor*' in the most polite of voices, the man ignored them. Just slightly turned his head to scan the gathering before continuing on without so much as a '*how do*' in return. Like a sharp slap. Like a rebuke that left them stunned when he did it.

“Did he hear us, y’all?” Mary Beth asked. “Maybe he didn’t hear us? He do look pretty old so he might be hard of hearing. My granddaddy was like that and we had to talk real loud when he was around.”

“He heard us.” Sue growled.

“He could be a soured man, y’all,” suggested Janice. “Just like my Daddy’s second cousin, Jasper -- he was like that -- all bitter and angry. Wouldn’t say boo to no one cause his wife ran out on him with some cowboy she met a the Saddle Hop after they stole his life savings on the way outta town. Totally ruined him. Called her “Jezebel” and what not, and didn’t have no kind word to say to no one. Maybe our new neighbor be like Jasper. The bible do say poisonous words come from the heart, you know.”

“You hear him say anything?” Sue countered. “And being jilted don’t give no man reason to be rude. Not even if he be Matthew, Mark, Luke or John himself. Ain’t no call.”

“Maybe he just didn’t hear us is all I’m saying,” Mary Beth whined. “I mean he wouldn’t be rude like that on purpose. There’d be no reason. Not with us.”

To the ladies of the Duro Mesa cul-de-sac -- Sue, Mary Beth, Janice, Sansa, Betty, and Maggie May -- being ill-mannered was the gravest of sins and the near equivalent to mortal damnation. It wasn’t how things were done. Not how they were raised, not what they expected, and not what they taught. And certainly not what they demanded from friends and neighbors. A Texan was always courteous even in the face of adversity -- even among strangers, foreign or otherwise, Christian or not. Rude just wasn’t done.

“Well, I know he be wrong and all,” Maggie May interjected, “but he only been here a week. Not really a lot of time to settle in and be sure of oneself. He’s a big fella too. Not bad looking, mind you, but his size probably keeps him insecure to the point of

being unsociable. We just need to offer him a little neighborly charity is all and help him see the light. I'll bet he's probably a big ol' teddy bear once you get to know him proper. Y'all know what I mean?"

"Did he give y'all the impression he was cuddly?" Sue spoke, "Maggie, you don't go hugging a snake when it's shaking it's rattle -- and you don't trust a man who don't have the decency to be polite to a lady."

The ladies admitted their new neighbor was pretty frightening. A mountain of a man, big and imposing really, standing easily six foot four, with a large head and a large beard. His shoulders were heavily muscled and he had tree trunk arms that ended in gnarled hands – big enough to easily tear meat right off the bone. And his piercing blue eyes, deep set in a square face, scanned everything, always scanning, making you uncomfortable if they raked across you. When he clenched his jowls, mouth grim in a straight line, head tilted to the side – he gave the impression he was listening to you, and judging you for what he heard. Which was disturbing and left every lady with the overall impression he was some kind of Greek Minotaur stalking a labyrinth, ready to crush you into mincemeat once he caught you.

"I don't understand why he just cain't say howdy," Mary Beth added, uncomfortably rubbing her arm. "It don't take much to nod your head up and down a little and say how do. Even Tony the Mailman smiles and tips his hat whenever he drops off catalogs and letters and whatnot at the mailbox. And he's *eye-talian*. But still, you glance his way and he nods and waves and all."

"Maybe this fella'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. "Y'all don't think he's a Yankee do you? From New York or someplace up

north? I hear they don't have no decent manners up there no how. Just curse at you and call you names right to your face like they was saying hello."

"Where'd you hear that? From one of your reality shows?" Maggie May asked.

"No, from Betty. She and her beau, Jackson, went up to New York last summer to see the Twin Tower memorial cause of Jackson being a fireman and all. And what Betty discovered was that all those people in Manhattan don't even talk to each other lest you talk to them first. And then, even when you talk to them, they be rude right to your face. Betty said she had the devil of a time keeping Jackson from punching nearly every street vendor they passed."

"No, he ain't no Yankee, though he do act like one a bit. Which is sayin' something," Sue commented. "No, he's Texan for sure. Didn't y'all notice the Texas flag tattoo on his forearm? And that Army Ranger insignia on the other? My daddy had those. Just like that. And he weren't no picnic neither. Though he still had manners, even when he was drunk. Most of the time that is."

Sue prided herself on her keen observation skills and knowing what was going on in the neighborhood. Which was her duty as a Texan and her way of protecting their homes against invaders to their nice cul-de-sac. So since the new neighbor had arrived, she'd been closely observing him come and go from his bungalow – the locally nicknamed "Lollipop" house – trying to close in on a proper profile.

No one believed the old Lollipop house would ever sell. The house sat vacant for more than a decade without prospect -- ever since the previous owner, "*Old Man*" Deever passed away. Rumor had it Sansa's husband, Charlie, once tried to buy the Lollipop house with the idea of tearing it down so he could extend his own property. But some kind of tangled legal issue cropped up where distant relatives wanted significantly more money than the property's value -- claiming the place was historic, rather than

just old and decaying. And as such, Charlie was forced to give up. Where it sat empty ever since. But then this year's summer gave way to fall and fall began decaying what summer had burnt, and their new neighbor arrived in the company of a young and exuberant Keller Williams real estate agent. Who turned over the keys and practically skipped back to his Oldsmobile, throwing the old 'For sale' sign into the trunk with glee. And in the process, set the neighborhood speculating over who had just purchased the Lollipop house.

"He lives alone as far as I can tell," Janice said. She was Sue's second in command and low key driveway hostess rival, having lived on the street almost as long as Sue. "Be surprised if there's any family comin' round cause that place is way too small for but one person. And it's definitely a fixer upper. Me and Roy walked through there years ago when they had that open house. Y'all remember that? We walked through and y'all wouldn't believe how tiny the place was. Like a dollhouse. So small Roy joked he couldn't even fit in the bathtub."

"In all fairness," Sue laughed, "Roy cain't fit in none of our bathtubs. The poor man's gained more than two hundred pounds since y'all married. And he weren't too small to begin with. Course he always tells everyone it's cause you're the best cook in all of Langtry County and you feed him like a king. And I do admit your sourdough biscuits and sausage gravy are way better than any I know."

"Well, bless your heart, Sue. My Roy has always been a man of appetites," Janice giggled. "Mama always said a man's *desire* rests in his jimmy, but his *love* comes from his stomach. Didn't your Mama ever teach you that? That a well fed husband keeps 'em happy and off your backside, 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’s skinny as a rail and don’t sit still long enough to eat, let alone have *appetites*. One child was all we managed and that took near twelve years trying. And her by the grace of God. Like I was Sarah in the desert with Abraham. But I don’t mind cause my Tommy’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 y’all know his work keeps him pretty busy travelling to Tampa and Chicago and whatever damn place his company needs him next. Hell, they keep him gone so much, I sometimes wonder if even knows where his own bed is. But we all have burdens to carry. Ain’t no reason to complain.”

“Well, bless his heart too,” Janice offered, sincerely taking Sue’s hand. She didn’t mention the gossip about Sue’s husband regularly having affairs during his travels. Or that he liked to brag about it to the other husbands during their annual fourth of July barbeque. It wouldn’t be the polite thing to do.

“You can bless his heart,” Sue replied. “But for me, as much as I love him, he can kiss my housekeeping, no cooking, one-baby ass while he’s at it! And if he ain’t careful, I might just find me a cowboy to run away with too. Wouldn’t that get his attention.”

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

Actually, all the Dura Mesa neighbors were fairly good friends, and as tight knit a collective as any cul-de-sac in Justin could offer. This was their rightful home. And a natural extension of their beliefs – that they lived in a nice, safe neighborhood in a nice, safe city in the biggest, best state within the greatest country on all of God’s green earth.

And it was up to them to keep it so. You couldn't get a single one of them to think differently if you tried.

"I have to admit 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 that house sits sandwiched between my property and Betty's with barely an arm's reach between the two. I know if I lived there I'd feel like I was living in a fishbowl."

"Well, I at least hope he has the good enough 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 our new JV freshman football players. Miles says the new freshman quarterback they just got transferred up from Corpus Christi is a bit of a rebel mess. And he's got all the JV freshman pumped up and fool 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. Cause neither of us want to be spending another year cleaning up raw eggs and toilet paper and smashed pumpkins all over driveway again."

Sansa chimed in. "Well, I hate to say it, but Charlie'll probably be foolish enough 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 bothered him 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 space for a barbeque no how. And he don't need to be keeping up with the Jones. But, y'all know Charlie. He's always determined to be sociable if it involves any gathering of menfolk."

"I can tell you this about our new neighbor," Sue jumped in, "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 the other old men. And he don't come back till at least two -- always carrying takeout from Roscoe's Chicken down the way and always with one of them plain brown paper bags you get over at Bowie Liquor on the corner. And y'all know what's inside that bag too. Glug-glug-glug," Sue mimed lifting her pinkie and drinking from an imaginary bottle.

"It don't have to mean that," Sansa replied. "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 have no one to take care of him. That's sad. I hate to think he's eating chicken right outta the bag and drinking straight from the bottle. Why I'd be ashamed if my own Augie did anything like that."

"Yeah well," Sue replied, "it don't bode well for no 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 called a "snoop" -- though she didn't see it that way. "Y'all can see he takes himself for a walk every evening after dinner too, but do he ever look steady when he do?"

"He walks fine near as I can tell," Maggie spoke up. "But it's the way he gives us the old "stink-eye" I mind. And have y'all noticed he don't say boo to us, but he stops to chat up the kids playing down the street? What's up with that?"

"He was just retrieving their ball. I don't think he was talking to them." Mary Beth said.

“Now that you mention it, I did notice how peculiar that was,” Sue replied. “Why just two days ago, I saw him stop and say something to Alice Severs on the corner when she was hula hooping. He stopped and said something and she laughed. Then smiled and walked on.”

“He did not.”

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

“Well, Alice is about as cute as a bug in a rug.”

“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, but don’t give adults the time of day? You know it gives 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 -- subconsciously striking a nerve too close to home. Though none of the other ladies knew that.

“What’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 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. Including Highlight Kids. We get the Justin Gazette too.”

“I didn’t even know you could do that. Get a newspaper from another state,” Mary Beth spoke up. “Course we get magazines only, the hunting and fishing kind. And I

get People. Augie won't have any newspapers in the house cause he says they's written by communists and meant to disturb good Christian folk with their lies."

"I know," Maggie May added, "Miles 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. Or gay or something worse. Maybe even a democrat."

"Not that part," Sue interrupted. "I wasn't talking about the magazines and such. Get this! Tony said he also delivered two official legal document letters to the Lollipop house."

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

"Cause they have to sign for them before Tony can turn them over -- all official and registered and legal like. Tony said one of them were from the Granbury Police Department and one from the Lancaster District Attorney's Office. How do you like that! No mail, gets a Yankee newspaper, a commie magazine and legal notices from the police? Don't y'all think that's odd? Hell, more than odd. That's suspicious as hell."

"Not necessarily," Sansa replied. "Why would that be odd? I mean Charlie and I sometimes get jury duty notices. I mean we don't have to sign for them, but it's not like this guy'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 gets legal notices from law enforcement? And we don't really know nothing about this guy -- where he come from, what he do. Especially why he moved here to our neighborhood by hisself. And then he don't say boo to us, but he stops to talk to our children? I'm starting to get a real bad feeling here, y'all."

"Maybe his wife is coming later?" Mary Beth chimed in, more uncomfortable than ever.

"Or maybe he moved here to be closer to his kids."

“Then why buy such a small place if he has family coming?” Sue reasoned. “Plus, there ain’t no woman alive who’d choose that place for her and her husband to live in. No, he don’t have no wife. And I doubt he has kids or grandkids. It’s in the eyes. I can tell 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 they talk about on the news.”

“Don’t those guys have to notify everyone if they move into your neighborhood?” Maggie spoke up, “I saw a Dateline once and those guys have to register with the police too....”

“He received a notice from the police!” Sue interrupted. “And from the DA’s office. Those are legal, y’all.”

“Oh my Lord in heaven,” Mary Beth exclaimed rubbing her arm fast enough to burn off the hair.

“Let’s not go wild with speculation, here,” Sansa cut in trying to be the voice of reason. “We don’t know that he’s a creep. 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 added, "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 dangerous. That's what my mamma instinct says. Remember that lawn care guy, Pedro something or other, who drove around here for a week? He said he was just looking for work, but then he tried to steal Jamie and Harry'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 wore a sign declaring himself a meth addict here to rob our homes. He wasn't that sophisticated either. 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," Sansa offered. "Or that it wouldn't be a good idea to look into it, but I'm just thinking maybe we give our neighbor some time too. 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."

"How? He strike you as the friendly type? He 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. 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

Charlie 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 Tuesday. Don't hurt to make a little extra," Janice added. "Roy and I will head over Tuesday."

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

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

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

The new neighbor could've been many things, but Sue was right about friendly not being one of them. So, over the next week, as each lady made the effort to welcome him to the 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 the visit and the food, but he was curt. And refused to take more than a moment with any of them, saying he had too much to do and not enough time to do it in. He thanked them again for their neighborliness, but closed the door on each of them as quickly as courtesy allowed.

Which confused the ladies. Because no one appreciates being rebuffed. Still, they noticed he could also 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 front porch immediately, all nice and stacked up, if 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 just cause it needed to be done and her husband had yet to get to it.

And then there were the children. Somehow, of the two dozen who played regularly around the neighborhood, none seemed scared of him – not the older ones he occasionally stopped to throw the football with, nor the younger ones when he took his turn holding the jump rope so they could skip double dutch. All the children seemed to trust him. 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." One day early on, she kicked a ball that hit the man square in the back of the head as he walked by. Becky froze, close to tears, afraid to move, thinking the giant neighbor was about to turn and yell at her for being "careless" – just like her father might do. But all the man did was rub the back of his head and laugh. Pick up the ball and roll it back to her with a "nice kick" comment. He even waved and responded, '*you're welcome*' when Becky finally yelled, "*THANK YOU!*" and raced away. Becky always found a way to greet the man after that -- often laughing and clapping at the things he'd say as he passed by.

As far as the women were concerned though, the fact that he was friendly with their children and not them was fast becoming proof he was up to no good. That was the kind of "grooming" behavior every "stranger danger" kid's program and news story warned parents to be vigilant over. And the ladies of Dura Mesa cul-de-sac, if anything, prided themselves on being vigilant.

"BECKY!" Sue screamed the following Saturday. Which made everyone jump. They were all sitting across her driveway, per usual, when Sue happened to look up and notice Becky standing at the far end of the street with their new neighbor. He was pointing back their way and saying something, but Becky was shaking her head no. Sue'd never seen Becky wander that far up the street before and it scared her.

"BECKY!" she screamed, "YOU NEED TO COME BACK HERE RIGHT THIS INSTANT OR I'LL TAN THAT HIDE OF YOURS BUT GOOD! MOVE, YOUNG LADY! NOW!"

Becky ran back, holding her soccer ball, wondering what she'd done. The old man, for his part, just gave Sue a look, turned and walked away.

"I think we have a serious problem, y'all." Sue complained. "I don't like what that man is doing. And 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 otherwise!"

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

"Look, y'all," Sansa said, the lone dissenter. "I'm an expert or anything, but assuming he's evil just cause he's an old cuss isn't proper. I mean we should look at the facts, he hasn't really done anything."

"Not true! The facts are he's about as friendly as a rattlesnake to us, but way too friendly with my daughter. Y'all can see that plain as day, can't you? And how he acted when we all visited? He's up to no good, we can all agree on that! Am I supposed to wait till he kidnaps my daughter to convince y'all? Not this Mama-hen."

"I'll help. I can still call my cousin in Fort Worth like I said," Maggie mentioned. "He'll be on duty tonight. He can run a background check for us."

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

"Alright. I'm in. I can have my boys start walking Becky around. To and from school if you like," Sansa added. "Then patrol the neighborhood after that and watch out for the other kids. They won't mind. Dale's working on his citizenship badge for his Eagle Scout promotions. And James will do whatever Dale does."

All the ladies of Dura Mesa agreed to help. It was the right thing to do. Sue, for her part, was determined to get the man out of her neighborhood before something worse happened.

Serendipity came to Dura Mesa Court the following Saturday -- a tipping point confirming Sue's worst fears. Becky disappeared in broad daylight despite dozens of neighborhood kids playing outside -- with versions of jump rope, tag, and marbles occupying most sidewalks and lawns. And a touch football game hosted by the JV football team in the middle of the street. But still Becky disappeared.

"Where in the world is that girl?" Sue questioned looking around. "Do any of y'all see Becky anywhere? I don't see her."

All the ladies looked, but no one could spot her in the jumble of activities.

"Maybe she went back to your house for a second to get something?"

"No, she knows to check in with me before she leaves the street. I just spoke to her about that. I'll tan that girl's backside if she snuck back inside and didn't tell me." Still Sue went back to the house, returning less than a half hour later worried. "Oh my God! I can't find Becky. She's not in the house or the back yard. And I don't see her out and about. 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. "Y'all know she wouldn't leave the street without telling me! Or be out of sight! But I don't see her anywhere."

"DALE!" Sansa yelled. "*Dale Lee Merrill*, you stop what you're doing and come here right this instant!"

Dale looked over at his mother. "Mom, we're in the middle of a game, here."

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

"Yes, ma'am." Dale grabbed James and sprinted over.

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

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

"Then pray tell where is she?"

"She's right over there on her porch where she been all morning," Dale 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 Jason, Maggie's youngest, who'd wandered over from the game. "She was over at the end of the street kicking her soccer ball when that new neighbor man came out. I thought he was gonna yell at her for kicking the ball against his fence, but he just turned around and went back up his driveway."

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

They all looked.

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

James 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.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my GOD!” Sue panicked. “He has her! I knew he was no good. Now he has her! We need to get over to his place and kick down the door! He has her in there right now! He could be doing unspeakable things to her. 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 suggested. “Becky’s sure to be around here somewhere. I don’t think she’d just go into his house with him. Let’s not jump to any conclusions.”

All the ladies jumped into action.

“Boys,” Sansa said, “Go get your father and the other men watching the football game in our living room. Tell them to come out here now.”

“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,” Maggie May added. “They won’t quit till we’ve found her, I promise.”

“Oh my God! You’re not listening. She’s not out here, she’s in there! I have to do something. He’s got her! I need to go get her! 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 what was going on.

“Sumbitch,” Roy spoke, “Are you sure he has her? Sumbitch!” Which was echoed by Miles, Charlie and Augie. “Okay boys, let’s figure out how we’re gonna take care of this problem!”

Just then, the police arrived, squelching their police siren as they pulled up -- so no one had to make the decision how to storm the Lollipop house or not.

Officer Jeff Almquist and his trainee partner, Tom Bayles, stepped out and were greeted by what felt like the entire neighborhood. They listened, trying to get a sense of what everyone was talking about, understanding, basically, that a little girl named Becky had disappeared and the parents thought she might've been abducted by the neighbor. Who might have her in his house right that instant. Jeff didn't wait any longer. "Right! Yes, ma'am. We'll check it out."

No one moved. But everyone watched as two policemen 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, hammer meets nail style.

The neighbor came to the door. But no one was prepared for how the police reacted when he did. Officer Almquist smiled in surprised recognition -- a big and genuine smile. "Hey, Bob," Officer Almquist said. "What are you doing here? You visiting someone?"

"Hi, Jeff." Bob replied, smiling back. "No, I just moved here not too long ago."

"I didn't know that. I thought you were still over at the ranch house in Arlington."

"No, I moved out after the funeral. I didn't want to stay there any longer. Too many memories, you know. That 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. "Well, Bob, sorry about this. But I got to let you know we're here on official business. If you can believe that." Here Officer Almquist looked back at the neighbors gathered. "Your, umm, your new neighbors called. They have a few concerns. Would you mind stepping out here a second and standing by with my partner while we have a conversation?"

Bob did, looking over at the neighbors gathered on the street in front of his driveway.

Officer Almquist introduced his partner. "Bob, this is Officer Bayles. Tom Bayles. He's a new trainee. I don't think you've met him. Tom, this is Robert Vega – Bob to his friends. He retired about a year ago as a detective up in Investigations, so you may not have crossed his path."

"I recognize him." Tom replied. Then to Bob, "I shook your hand after the funeral. So sorry for what happened. But hey, I seen your photos in the hallway down by rollcall - including that one showing you taking down that stolen car jacker. Pretty awesome."

Officer Almquist cut in. "Sorry 'bout this, Bob, but if you don't mind standing by with Tom here for a few minutes, I'd appreciate it."

"You aren't holding any weapons on you now are you, sir?" Officer Bayles asked.

"No," Bob replied looking over at the neighbors again. Seeing them all gathered, watching intently, wondering what they were up to. Recognizing a mob when he saw one – the kind that called 911 instead of using pitchforks and torches. And that intimidatingly angry look dropped down over his face again.

Sansa shivered. Janice and Maggie May averted their gaze. Mary Beth nearly fainted. Even the men started toeing the ground and rubbing the back of their necks. Only the children watched, frankly interested. As did Sue, who 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. The door is open."

"Anyone else inside?"

"No. Why would there be?"

"Just a question. Be back in a second. Tom, you 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, holding Jason's hand, "Why are there policeman at Mr. Vega's house?"

When everyone looked at Jason and Becky, blinking their eyes in surprise, Jason explained, "I caught up with Becky down at KB'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 KB's on the corner, 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?"

"No, darling, you're not," Officer Almquist laughed. "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, right?"

"Yes, sir."

With that settled, Officer Almquist thought about it a second and then turned to address the group. "Look folks. I'm gonna tell you all, I know Bob for a long time and he's a good man. A true hero. He wouldn't want me talking about him like this, but I think y'all need to hear it. He's a retired police detective who 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 one more thing. Don't let on about this either, but he just lost his entire family not but a year ago. His wife, his children, even his grandchildren. They all died in a plane crash heading off on vacation. Bob was supposed to go with them, but he got called back to work on a case and was gonna meet up with them later. So he wasn't on the flight. But when he got news, he took it pretty hard -- his whole family dying like that. We all did. He retired right after the funeral."

Officer Almquist walked away, but turned back a second later. "Look, y'all don't have to listen to me none. But whatever you're thinking about Bob, it ain't so. He's a good

man whose had it hard for a while and y'all should give him a break. I know how he can seem to others, but that ain't the case. And he deserves every one of your respect and patience. You understand?"

Officer Almquist returned to Officer Bayles standing with Bob and explained everything. Bob Vega. Retired police. Detective twice decorated.

"Mr. Bob Vega," Becky told her mother. "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. Just like on your records. It was very funny."

"Oh," was all Sue said.

The neighbors drifted away. No one seemed to have anything else to say. And no one felt comfortable. So they went 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 catch up on.

Most were still secretly watching out their windows when the police car left the Lollipop house thirty minutes later. Only Sue, who was still sitting in her driveway, refused to look. Staring and not understanding why.

Bob didn't take his customary walk that evening. Nor the next morning. No one saw much of him after that.

On the next Saturday, all the ladies gathered in Sue's driveway out of habit. But no one spoke for a while. Everyone just sat in awkward silence, not wanting to be the first to

broach what had happened a week earlier and why they hadn't seen their new neighbor since.

"Maybe he took a vacation?" Mary Beth finally suggested, "And we didn't see him leave?"

"Could be," Janice 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 considered. "We used some of those when we went on vacation last year. They turn your lights on and off so people think you're at home."

"He's probably hiding, y'all. Feeling guilty for what he put us through," Sue said.

"Cause we almost caught him. Now he knows we're watching him."

"But he didn't do anything Sue. You were there. Didn't you hear what the officer said about him? His family and all," Sansa 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. I'm not wrong about these things. Else, why would he be hiding out in his house? I ain't seen hide nor hare of him since he almost got caught. That alone is suspicious."

"No, Sue, it isn't. 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 being rebuffed. "Well, how about the rest of you? How about you, Maggie? Mary Beth? Y'all know what I'm talking about."

"You know," Maggie 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 folded up her chair and left. Which took them by surprise.

“You know, I think I’m gonna head home too,” Mary Beth said. “I’ve been meaning to try a new recipe I seen on Paula Deen’s cooking show. 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.”

Janice joined in. “You know, 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. We haven’t gone out to dinner, just him and I, for a spell now. Tonight seems like a good night.” Janice picked up her chair, folded it and left. “I’ll see y’all later. Have a blessed evening.”

“You know,” Sansa said, “I think I’m gonna head home too. 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.”

All the ladies gathered their things and left, leaving Sue alone in her driveway.

“Well, okay, y’all,” Sue tried to sound chipper. “See y’all later.” She smiled, but it wasn’t sincere. Inside, she was bothered – disappointed and a bit unsure of herself after her day ended so unexpectedly. She couldn’t remember the last time the ladies of Dura Mesa hadn’t all sat together well into the night, drinking and talking. Saturday’s were their cul-de-sac time together.

Sue sat for a long time staring across at the Lollipop house wondering why things felt different and knowing it had to do with that house. The Lollipop house. And the old man who’d come uninvited into their neighborhood. If she could, she’d go back in time just so she could burn the place down so he never would’ve come in the first place.

He scared us, is what Sue decided. He's dangerous 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 and stays gone so we can all feel safe again and return to our nice peaceful neighborhood. If not me, then who?!

Serendipitously, Sue didn't have to lift a finger to get her wish. After two more weeks of empty Saturdays, with Sue sitting alone in her driveway, four big burly men drove up in a large moving van and parked at the end of the cul-de-sac. They extended the truck ramp up the driveway to the Lollipop house and began walking back and forth, in and out, loading boxes and furniture into the truck. It didn't take long -- say ninety minutes -- till the back of the truck was loaded and the men driving away. Just as they did, a young Keller Williams real estate agent showed up to re-plant a "For Sale" sign out front. He didn't look too happy either when he climbed back into his Oldsmobile and left the neighborhood.

When Tony the mailman came around, Sue had a quick conversation with him. And confirmed what Sue was only too happy to know -- the man had moved out and all his mail was set to be forwarded to another address in Fort Worth.

Sue was excited. It had been several Saturdays since she and the ladies had sat the afternoon away in her driveway. She wouldn't admit it, but she missed being the leader who had people to follow. But they were all safe now, she decided, and would gather together again, like they'd always done. And she could preside over her court.

I think I'll surprise everyone and make a pitcher of mint julips, Sue thought. Then we all can have a nice long visit.

Sue was thinking about how pleasant that would be when she looked at the mail Tony had handed her. And gasped. A postcard addressed to her, written by Bob Vega.

Which read:

*However hard a person looks,
However hard may be their 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 wondered.

The End.

