

Neighborly Killing 1

Regan was one more flutter of eyelashes away from sleep. When she startled awake, her eyes wide open, she didn't trust what she had heard. She thought she might have imagined the sound in the split second before sleep came.

Tom, lying in bed next to her, flinched slightly with the second report.

"What was that?" she asked, rolling in his direction and putting her hand lightly against his back.

"A gunshot. A rifle shot." His voice was barely louder than a whisper, but it held no hint of sleepy haze.

She pushed an elbow under her and propped herself up so she could see over his shoulder to the outside. After promising El Niño rains in January, the skies had dried and temperatures hit record highs, leaving California still in a drought on this leap year last night of February. A rainfall Miracle March looked possible, though, and their house, at sixteen-hundred feet elevation on the windward side of the Santa Cruz Mountains, was under promising clouds, teasing that they might produce rain. She couldn't see anything clearly in the diffused light of their mist-filled cloud cover except the bricks of their patio which glistened with moisture.

"Do you think it's pig hunters?"

It had been several years since Bonny Doon had an outbreak of wild pigs. That episode was ended by experienced pig hunters who asked only for the meat they killed in exchange for ridding the countryside of the destructive beasts.

"Not on a night like this and not so near houses. The pig hunters gave notice a few days before they started hunting, too, so no one would be concerned when they heard shots, and they only hunted right after nightfall and right before dawn. Besides, I haven't heard anyone complain about pigs lately. Have you?"

"No, I haven't ..."

Two more shots rang out in rapid succession, the second shot sounding before the echo of the first ceased.

Tom sat bolt-upright in bed. “Those blasts were close, I bet not more than thirty yards away.” He swung his long legs to the floor. “Whoever is shooting, they’re moving in our direction and getting awfully close.”

Regan usually loved the glass wall on the back side of their house which provided wonderful views over Monterey Bay and the Pacific Ocean. Tonight that feature made her feel exposed and vulnerable. As the gunshots came closer, she would have happily traded the view for substantial bullet-stopping walls.

Tom was out of bed, robe-less, and searching for his rubber-soled slippers. As soon as he found them and wiggled his feet into them, he reached for the putter he had stowed between his nightstand and the window. He gripped it tightly in one hand as he stood at the bedside sliding door, open a couple of inches for fresh air, and peered into the night.

Regan’s tone was apprehensive. “You’re not going to ...”

“I can make out a light,” he said in a soft voice. “It’s blurred and small; could be from a flashlight. It’s close, coming from the hillside below our patio and moving toward us.”

Regan thought she could see a faintly brightening patch beyond the patio’s edge, too.

“I want you away from the windows.” Tom barked a command at her in a husky whisper, “Go! Open the garage door and get in your car. Be ready to leave.”

“No. Not unless you come with me.”

The light outside stopped moving. There was another shot, but it sounded different from the previous shots. It lacked the power and resonant sound of rifle fire and was just a pop. The hillside light moved downhill a few feet and stopped.

As they waited for what would come next, Regan forgot to breathe. She strained to hear any sounds

through the narrow door opening.

Was she imagining it or were there voices outside? Tom cocked his head. She wasn't imagining; he heard something, too. The voices grew loud enough to fill the night. Words reached Regan's and Tom's ears, but they were shouted and full of emotion ... and impossible to understand.

After a time, the voices ceased and all grew quiet again as the night was suddenly more brightly illuminated than it had been. The silence was rent once more, first by a long wailing cry, and then by another pop. The sky darkened abruptly, the small light wavered, and after a couple of seconds, pointed upward like a wispy beacon.

Regan slipped out of bed and pressed against the wall by their headboard with zeal, as if proximity to wood framing covered in sheetrock might offer some protection from a bullet.

"Go! Now!" Tom snapped, but she made no movement to do what he ordered.

Regan and Tom froze into tense poses, still and listening. The night remained silent. The bedroom wall clock, ticking off seconds with earsplitting abandon, was the only sound they heard.

After listening to the oppressive quiet outside for a good two-minute interval, Tom instructed, "Stay where you are then, if you insist, but be ready to call 9-1-1 if you hear anything ... anything ... and if you do — I mean it — leave, get out of here."

He slid the door open fully before she could protest, and pushed the screen slider open enough to squeeze through, crouching low as he cleared the door. He rested the putter on his shoulder and moved stealthily toward the edge of the patio, stopped there, slowly raised his head to peer over the low brick wall, and strained to see into the darkness. Then with a sudden move he vaulted over the wall. He stayed bent low, and using the golf club like a ski pole to aid his balance, he began descending the steepening slope that separated the civilization of their patio from the woodlands below. He disappeared from Regan's view.

The tension Regan felt seemed to stretch time; even so, she didn't have to wait long to see Tom

reappear. He had added a flashlight to what he was carrying and moved rapidly uphill. The features of his face, lit from below by the flashlight, looked haunted.

“Call 9-1-1. Tell them I found ... I can’t be sure, but I think it’s our neighbor, Paul.”

“Is he dead?” Regan asked even though she knew what his answer would be.

“Most definitely.”



Dave, though still on the Santa Cruz Police Department payroll, was not usually called on for middle of the night duty. He was grumpy as he joined the officer interviewing Regan and Tom in their living room. It was a little after 2:00 a.m. He could have used either strong coffee or more sleep. He had lost an eye in a line-of-duty-shootout years before and wore a convincing artificial replacement that perfectly mimicked his sighted eye. Tonight it looked as drowsy as he did.

“I have to be on TV pretty regularly and I don’t wear makeup — wouldn’t be manly or in keeping with my being with the police force to wear makeup — so I need my beauty sleep, and, thanks to you,” he aimed his complaint at Regan, “I’m not getting any tonight, am I?”

“Don’t blame me,” she answered defensively, “I called the police, not you.”

He twisted his face into a “how dense you are” kind of smirk. “They probably heard your name, knew how your meddling has a way of putting you in the midst of murder investigations, and how I’m your friend and the one who always has to set things straight with the police when you make a mess, and just assumed ...”

“Actually, Officer Everett, I’m the one who had you called,” the policeman offered. “And I didn’t know y’all were friends or that you had a history,” he drawled with a soft southern tempo more suited to

Tennessee than Santa Cruz, California.

“Media already picked up on this ... situation. If you didn’t pass them on the way in, it’s only because their camera crew must have gotten lost on the way up here. Maybe someone new to the area like I am accidentally sent them to Ben Lomond instead of Bonny Doon,” he winked at Regan. “Both those locations sound the same to me, both kinda like places in Scotland.

“Even so, it’s just a matter of time ‘til they figure it out. They’ll be clamorin’ for a comment from our Police Ombudsman, which is you, Officer Everett. I kinda thought you’d like a heads-up; wouldn’t like getting blindsided by some hotshot news reporter with a mic and a camera on your way to work tomorrow morning. But I just figured someone would fill you in with as much as we know so far. I didn’t think anyone would tell you to get out of bed and come on up here.”

“Oh, Dave, no one did, did they? You came on your own,” Regan cooed. “You sacrificed your cozy bed to make sure we’re OK.”

Dave ignored her, concentrating instead on the notes the police officer handed him. He scanned quickly and handed them back.

“You found the body, Tom?” His question and the next words from him were more rhetorical than questioning and delivered rapidly. “You went out into the woods in the middle of the night after a gunshot in close proximity to your house woke you and Regan up, armed with your trusty putter? Is that right? And after you found the body, you picked up the flashlight near it so you could take a good look at the guy, thought he might be your neighbor from down the road, and used the flashlight to make it easier to see climbing up the hill. Is that about right?”

“I shouldn’t have picked up the flashlight, should I, even though it was away from the body and wedged into the Vinca plants?” Tom sounded mildly embarrassed.

“No, you shouldn’t have. You shouldn’t have done any part of what you did. See now, I can understand if it was Regan doing something reckless and stupid — I’d almost expect it of her — but I

thought I could count on you to be the reasonable one in this,” he waved his hand in their direction, “duo. For all you knew, somebody just popped your neighbor and could have been lurking, ready to do the same thing to you if you got too close to him. You’re lucky we aren’t investigating a double homicide.”

Tom nodded sheepishly. “In retrospect I can see that, but at the time I was pumping adrenaline.” His eyes softened for the first time since he awoke and he tried to diffuse Dave’s annoyance with humor. “Besides, I was carrying my lucky putter to defend myself — had it by my bedside ready for tomorrow’s — today’s — big round of golf — so nothing bad could have happened to me.”

Dave’s response was more wistful than judgmental. “Yeah, right. Hormones and bravado. That’s how I lost my eye in that shootout. Law enforcement guys like me are trained not to stick our necks out, but in the heat of the moment ... adrenalin working instead of my brain ... So now that’s why I’m gonna’ be wearing this prosthetic eye the rest of my life and why I’m a media guy now instead of a regular cop. Tom, you took a big chance.”

“And an excellent prosthetic it is, Officer Everett, the way it tracks with your real eye,” the young police officer empathized before getting the conversation back on track. “Sir, Ma’am, you were fixin’ to tell me about the gunshot you heard.”

“Gunshots. There were four gunshots that sounded like rifle fire and then one pistol shot, and after a long pause and what sounded like an argument, another pistol shot.” Tom’s statement and his words were clear and precise.

“Six shots?” the policeman frowned.

“That’s right. Four and two.”

“And you’re sure about that?”

Regan confirmed what Tom said. “I heard them, too. And the voices.” Regan looked at Tom for confirmation.

He nodded in agreement. “Our slider was open a few inches so we got some sound from outside. I couldn’t be one-hundred percent certain, but it sounded to me like there were two voices outside, agitated voices. They certainly could have been arguing.”

Regan shuddered as she spoke. “Then there was that quiet and then that terrible scream — it almost didn’t seem human — and then the final gunshot.”

“Ahh,” the policeman wiped his upper lip with his finger, “could I talk to you for a minute, Officer Everett? In the kitchen.”

“Problem?” Dave quizzed the officer.

The officer ignored Dave’s question. He swiftly rose to his feet. “Excuse us, please, ma’am, sir,” he said politely as he started toward Regan and Tom’s kitchen.

Dave raised his eyebrows toward Regan and then silently followed the officer.

“Why the need for privacy?” Tom asked when he and Regan were alone.

She put a hand on his, raised a finger in admonition and mouthed a soft, “Shh.”

They listened intently, trying to eavesdrop, but couldn’t make out the kitchen conversation until Dave’s voice became sufficiently animated. “Of course they’re reliable witnesses, both of them, her maybe even more than him. And if they agree, I’d say rock solid. So Tom took the flashlight. He would have admitted it if he tampered with anything else, especially a weapon. And as for wanting publicity — good grief — having a body found outside their house, that’s the last kind of publicity they’d want.”



Tom didn’t let a little thing like only getting a couple of hours sleep and a dead neighbor keep him

from his Wednesday morning golf outing. He and his foursome had an 8:30 a.m. tee time at the Pasatiempo Golf Course, and with commute traffic to consider and breakfast to be eaten at the clubhouse before the round, he kissed Regan goodbye in the dawning morning just before 7:30.

Regan curled up in front of the TV in her robe — an upgrade from her usual pajamas-only routine — in deference to the forensic team that was still wandering around their hillside. She had given up trying to sleep as soon as Tom left their bed. He may have been nonplussed by a so recently discovered body just yards from their home, but she wasn't, even after the coroner had come and gone with the remains.

She clicked on the eight o'clock local news broadcast expecting to see Dave detailing the night's grisly find as the lead story, but with a shooting in Salinas overnight and a grassfire near Watsonville that had everyone on edge, Dave only made the number three story spot.

He sported a blue, green, and white shirt, still Hawaiian in theme in keeping with his trademark look, but a subdued piece of clothing for him. He could have used some of the stage make-up he forswore; he looked as tired as she felt.

"Residents in normally quiet Bonny Doon were awakened last night by gunfire," the reporter announced from off camera, keeping the focus on Dave. Regan counted a small blessing: their names and address hadn't been included by the reporter. She'd bet money that omission was Dave's doing and she planned to say thanks to him with a proper note attached to a six-pack of his favorite beer. "Santa Cruz Police Ombudsman Dave Everett has the details."

"The investigation is still in the preliminary stages, but at this time the coroner does not believe foul play was involved in the death. It appears that the deceased was the victim of a single self-inflicted gunshot wound."

"What?" Regan was so startled by Dave's statement that she questioned his image on the TV screen out loud, "What about the shots we heard, and the voices?"

"The deceased, a male in his mid-forties, has been positively identified; however, his name is being

withheld pending notification of his family.”

The reporter was clearly disappointed by Dave’s brevity and the lack of titillating details being offered. He finished using his best hard-driving reporter technique. “There are some unexplained circumstances surrounding the death, aren’t there, Officer Everett?”

Dave raised his eyebrows ever so slightly and tilted his head just a bit, aiming a benign look at the persistent reporter. “Other than the fact that the apparent suicide took place near a neighbor’s house rather than on the victim’s property, no, nothing seems to be unusual in this sad case.”

Regan debated calling Tom immediately, but decided to give him a chance to enjoy his round of golf before she told him Dave had just gone public with a big whopper about what happened last night.