

Short Story

The New Neighbours

by

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## The New Neighbours

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The house next door had stood empty since Hazel's death; without the life of its former owner, it was a shell of a home, dark and dormant. Until one evening in late October, when like lungs taking in a new breath, light filled the house once again.

From his bedroom window, Michael watched a lofty middle-aged man as he lugged a frail-looking woman in a wheelchair backwards up the porch steps. That was the last he saw of them that evening, and the lights were out early.

Michael's mother Carol had also noticed the new arrivals, and took it upon herself to make them feel welcome. The very next day, she busied herself putting together a hamper of wine and cheeses, and insisted Michael to join her in delivering it.

Standing on the porch, Carol exaggerated a struggle with the weight of the basket in her arms.

"Ring the doorbell, will you, Michael?" she grunted.

Michael huffed as he raised a floppy arm to the button. He pressed it for a few seconds before retracting his arms again and resuming his reluctant slouch. The man of the house answered.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm Carol Cunningham, and this is my son Michael. We're from next door."

The man nodded.

"James Linden. Nice to meet you."

His tone was polite yet standoffish. Carol grinned awkwardly, extending the hamper toward him.

"We wanted to stop by and welcome you to the neighbourhood. Michael and I—"

“Thank-you, but this really isn’t a good time.”

“Oh, I see. Is your wife home?”

“She’s not well.”

“Well, if there is anything we can do to help, I’d be more than happy. I used to care for Hazel who used to live here—”

“My wife has all the help she needs. She spends most of her day in bed. Excuse me.”

James closed the door, and Carol huffed in defeat.

“Well, that’s that I guess,” she muttered, turning and marching home.

Much to the disappointment of Carol’s curiosity, the Lindens continued to keep to themselves. James left in the mornings and returned home in the evenings. His wife was nowhere to be seen.

Michael’s brown football held a bittersweet significance for him; his father had played catch with him almost every afternoon when he was alive. Those memories were happy ones, but also brought a twinge of sadness. Michael enjoyed playing catch with his best friend Jacob now, but it just wasn’t the same.

Jacob held the football at arm’s length, preparing for a run up. Michael raised his hands and tipped his head back, stumbling as the ball sailed over his head and across the fence.

“Ja-cob!”

Balancing unsteadily in Jacob’s cupped hands, Michael pulled himself up against the timber palings and peered over the fence.

“I can see it!” he grunted.

Jacob let him back down to the ground. The two boys hurried next door and up the front steps to the porch. Michael rang the bell, and once again James Linden answered.

“My ball is in your yard. Can I have it back, please?”

“I’m having dinner,” James grumbled. “Perhaps you should be more careful!”

James abruptly closed the door, and Michael huffed loudly, storming home with Jacob in tow. Carol was in the kitchen preparing dinner.

“That guy next door won’t give my ball back!” Michael exclaimed.

“Well, you remember how annoyed Hazel used to get about it. She held onto your ball a few times too.”

“But...”

“Give it a few days and if he hasn’t thrown it back go and ask him again. He’s probably very busy looking after his wife.”

From his bedroom window, Michael peered through his binoculars at the house next door.

A light was on in an upstairs bedroom, and he tried to catch a glimpse of the elusive Mrs. Linden. Downstairs, an empty dinner plate was discarded on the kitchen table, which was visible through a window.

James appeared, stepping out onto the porch. In his hands he held Michael’s football.

“He’s got it!”

Michael watched on, eagerly anticipating James’ move toward the fence to toss the ball back over. Instead, he stepped back inside.

*“What?”*

Michael set the binoculars down, looking at Jacob.

“I have to get it back, Jacob. It belonged to my dad.”

“How are you going to do that?”

Michael paused thoughtfully.

“Break in.”

“What?”

“We can go in through the basement window.”

“We?”

“You have to help me, Jacob. You threw it over there.”

“I don’t know, Michael. What if we get caught?”

“We’ll go during the day when he’s not there.”

The next afternoon, Michael and Jacob scaled the fence. Crouching beside the small window at the back of the house, Michael smashed the glass, and one at a time each boy eased his way into the basement.

They crossed the floor to the staircase, and at the top they opened a door that led to the first level of the house. There was a small bathroom and laundry room to their left, and to their right a closed door. The boys proceeded down the hall toward the living room, poking around and opening cupboards and drawers.

“It’s not in here,” Jacob reported.

Michael sighed.

“Have a look in the kitchen. I’m going upstairs.”

Michael took to the stairs one careful step at a time, temporarily freezing at the slightest creak in the timber. He made it to the top, his heart was thumping in his chest. Where had that idiot put his ball?

The master bedroom was on his right. He stopped still. The door was wide open. Turn back now, he thought. Turn back now!

Michael crept along the hallway. The bedroom furniture came into view. There was a neatly made queen-sized bed, but Mrs. Linden was not in it.

Two other bedrooms were located on the upstairs level of the house. The doors to both rooms were open, and Michael did not see Mrs. Linden or his ball in either. Michael returned downstairs and met up with Jacob.

“I looked in the kitchen,” Jacob reported. “Your ball’s not there or in the garage. Sorry, Michael.”

“Let’s try the basement again.”

The boys made their way down the hall toward the basement, when Michael suddenly stopped by the closed door.

“Jacob, wait.”

Before Jacob could say anything, Michael was inside the room. His football sat rested against the leg of a double bed, in which laid Mrs. Linden. Her hair was thin and wiry, her eyes sunken and skin pale.

“Jacob!” Michael shouted.

“What?”

“Come here! *Now!*”

Jacob backtracked to the door, stopping dead in his tracks.

“We weren’t going to steal anything, I swear!” Michael stammered. “We were just looking for my ball!”

“Help me, please,” Mrs. Linden wheezed.

She reached for the blanket covering her legs, pulling it back with one swift movement. Her legs were horribly disfigured, bent and twisted from old fractures. Her ankles were covered in bruises and welts, shackled to the bars at the end of the bed.

“He’s keeping me down here!” she whimpered.

Michael lifted his eyes to look at her face.

“W-what do you want us to do?”

“Call the police. Tell them my name is Lisa McDermott. I’ve been missing for nine years.”

“We don’t want to get into trouble,” said Michael.

“You won’t. You don’t have to tell them you were in here. Just tell them you heard noises coming from this house. Tell them you heard me screaming.”

Her eyes were strained with pure desperation.

“Please, this might be my only chance to get help. I am going to die down here.”

Michael looked at Jacob again and then back at Lisa.

“Okay.”

“Thank you so much,” she whispered. “Make the call right away, okay?”

Michael scooped up the football from the floor. He and Jacob turned and scurried out of the room, down the stairs into the basement, and back through the window. Once inside Michael’s house, they shut themselves in his bedroom.

“Oh my God,” Jacob cried. “Oh my God!”

“*Shuuush!*” Michael hissed.

“What are we going to do, Michael? What should we do? Should we tell the police? What would we tell them?”

There was a hammering knock on the door, and both boys jumped.

“Michael? Jacob?”

“I thought you said she was out!” Jacob hissed.

“She was!”

“Michael? Jacob? Are you in there?”

“Yes!”

Carol opened the door, and her smile quickly dissipated.

“What’s wrong, boys?”

News of the suburban horror that had been uncovered on Maple Avenue spread across the country. Lisa McDermott was a psychologist who had disappeared nine years earlier. James Linden had been her patient.

James had developed an unhealthy obsession with Lisa, and when she had rebuffed his advances, he had waited outside her clinic one evening and run her down with his car as she left to go home.

He had dragged her broken body into his vehicle and taken off, keeping her alive in captivity. When his estranged mother died he had inherited her estate, and the relocation to Maple Avenue had provided an opportunity to further conceal his prisoner.

Michael sat at the kitchen counter munching on an afternoon snack, while Carol scrubbed dishes in the sink.

“I’m very proud of you, Michael,” Carol said. “If it weren’t for you and Jacob, Lisa may never have been found.”

She looked out the kitchen window to the house next door, which once again stood dormant.

“I just knew something was going on over there! I just can’t believe this was happening in our neighbourhood! Right under our noses!”

There was a knock on the door, and Michael dropped the crust of his sandwich on his plate and slid down from his chair.

“Where are you off to?” Carol enquired.

“Jacob’s here, we’re going to play catch.”

ENDS