

Where the Danger Is

The weather was cold and gray as usual at this time of year. The trees were all leafless, with fall now just a memory. Christmas was just a few weeks away, and all the kids were looking forward to staying home from school for a few weeks and to the “big payoff” on Christmas morning. Not having to go to school was good, but usually by the time vacation was over, going to school was a big relief. Back to the friends to compare “loot” from Christmas and, to reestablish those fragile ties that hold kids together. At school, students were praised for doing good work, not belittled for each and every mistake. No one there was fighting, and being too loud was against the rules. Right now, the world outside of home was more safe and structured, not chaotic, scary and loud. Even when bad things did happen, it was always far away and nothing to be too concerned about. With Dad often having too much to drink, and Mom just mad at everyone all the time, being home was not usually a very pleasant experience.

Playing outside in the woods or at a friend’s house was the norm for three of us kids. We knew everyone that lived on our road, and except for the cranky old people who lived at the bottom of the hill, everyone was nice to us. In a small rural community, the only thing to be feared at that time of year was crashing on a sled or frost bite from staying out too long. Unless something like that happened, the only rule was to be home before dark.

But that weekend morning was different. We were all home, and the day was starting off rather quietly. None of the kids were arguing, no dogs were barking, and Mom and Dad were actually talking, not shouting or sniping at each other. Dad was sitting at his spot at the dining room table, and Mom was in the kitchen starting breakfast. Usually sitting along the table with

Dad at the head was like being at a tennis match, watching the action and listening to the arguments between him at the end and Mom over at the stove.

When the telephone rang, Dad didn't pick it up, even though he was sitting next to it. Mom walked over behind him and answered the call.

“Hello? Hi, Bobbie. What? What are you talking about? How did this happen? Oh, my God, I don't believe it! When did they find her? Oh, poor Connie, how will she handle this?” Mom's voice kept getting higher and higher in pitch, and the tears were starting to flow. This sort of response was totally out of character for her. We all just sat there trying to figure out what sort of gossip our next-door neighbor would have that would cause such a reaction. Dad didn't say anything, but somehow knew that whatever had happened was completely out of the ordinary. Events occur during each lifetime that forever alter the perception of the world being a safe place to play in. Feeling secure means being at home, no matter the atmosphere, with the door locked up tight.

When Mom finally got herself under control, she said in a low voice, “Margaret was found murdered this morning over on Lauffer Mine Road.” Suddenly, our safe little community became a place of uncertainty and confusion where one of the neighbor's children was a victim of a killer. The thought that a murderer might be on the loose in our area was one without precedent. The most serious crimes until this moment had been kids coming and soaping the windows on Halloween night. The idea of something like this happening to one of the neighborhood children was almost unbelievable.

As the day wore on, this tragedy lost some of its shock value and became a part of our reality. Mom was on the phone quite a bit, talking in hushed tones with the neighbors. The gossip mill was in full swing. Who did it? And why? Was it a stranger, or maybe someone we all knew?

State police cars cruised up and down all day, looking everywhere, even around our house. All three of us stayed pretty close to home that day. No one was playing outside or calling us to come down the road to play. Dad was quite glad not to have to get on us too much to leave Mom alone, or stop fighting among ourselves and be quiet. For just a short period of time, we were where we desired to be.

Going to bed that night and turning out all the lights was a terribly frightening experience, even for a big fourth-grader. Every noise outside could be the killer walking through our yard. Every time the dogs barked, we looked outside to see if anyone was there. What if the killer was up in the woods behind our house, or hiding in the garage? Being frightened of someone lurking outside was a new experience. Up until then, I never checked to see if the front door was a locked before we went to bed. But the events of that day brought home the reality that my chaotic home was as safe as Dad and Mom could make it. Home really was a haven, and real danger could be as close as the other side of that locked door.

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