

## Under Attack

Since learning a sex offender lived at the bottom of their hill, Leigh walked her children to school, and drove them to their playdates. Every day, up and down the hill, she would watch for the predator.

One morning, after walking the kids to school, she saw him with a dog. Good Lord, she thought, he has a lure. As his Golden Retriever stopped to do his business, their eyes met. Leigh looked away quickly, heart racing as she walked by. Rushing into the house, she grabbed the sex offender registry, and double-checked his picture. Yes, it was him. Rape of a minor.

Soon after, the children were in the car with her, driving up the hill, when she saw him again. She slowed, and insisted they look at the man.

“Ma, we see him, don’t worry,” Mark said, appearing bored. Preadolescence was beginning to make him bristle at any sign of parental concern.

“This is very serious, Mark. See his dog? He might use it to get kids to go with him. He might invite you in to play with his dog. He is a bad man!!!”

She hated herself even as she said this. She did not want her children growing up afraid of the world, judging people. But this was real, goddammit! He lived on her street. It could happen. Anything could happen, she thought.

“Don’t worry, Mommy. We won’t talk to him.” Kimmie said. “Is his dog bad, too?” she wondered aloud. Oh, goodness, now her kids might be afraid of dogs as well!

Leigh had been on edge since the deaths in her family. Nothing seemed as it should be, after losing her father and niece to a hit and run. And now, there was this creep in her beloved neighborhood, where had always lived and felt safe. This part of the city had always felt like a village to her.

It seemed she saw the man more and more, and not just on their street. He was at the corner store, the supermarket, the library. What was happening? Was it that phenomena of always seeing red cars once you buy one? Or was he now aware of her children and stalking them? She found herself going back to the sex offender list, and reading it from cover to cover. Were there always sex offenders around, and she just didn’t know it?

Leigh threw herself into her teaching, forcing her thoughts back to work when she felt a panic attack coming on. She thought less of “the bad man,” as Kimmie called him, and in time, saw

less of him, too. The list lay forgotten, covered by the daily detritus of papers that regularly piled up on the kitchen island.

In February, she heard that the sex offender at the bottom of the hill had moved. Leigh slept better than she had in months.

There was a feisty girl in Leigh's class that year she was particularly fond of. During morning circle time Crystal talked about TV shows, going to the Super 88 market with her grandmother, and playing video games. Her world seemed as limited as her language skills, being split into three by her mother's Chinese, grandmother's Khmer, and the school's English. For the Peace Day poster contest, Crystal had drawn a pizza.

"Tell me about this," Leigh asked.

"For the contest. Peez." Leigh sighed. Could she really believe it was a Pizza Day contest, and not Peace Day?"

Leigh decided to bring Crystal along one spring weekend, when she was taking her own children bowling.

During a clunky phone call with Crystal interpreting, Leigh made her intentions known, and mom eagerly agree.

Leigh set off for Lakeview, the low-income complex where the girls lived. She had scribbled down the apartment number, 5G, on a scrap of paper. After locating the right building, she climbed to the fifth floor, and found doors A through F, and two doors at the end of the hall without letters on them. Leigh listened, trying to determine which door was Crystal's. The sound of a television came from one apartment, while a barking came from the other. Leigh remembered Crystal talking about dogs, but wasn't sure she had one. She knocked, and the door opened to a man, bent over, holding a choke chain on a golden retriever.

Leigh gasped involuntarily. The man straightened, peering at her.

"Sorry. I... I... have the wrong apartment."

"I seen you before. You're that lady that was always staring at me going up the hill."

"Yes."

“You saw me on that list, didn’t you? I watched you point me out to your kids. It was a bunch of bullshit. I didn’t do what they said.”

“Criminal Sexual Conduct,” Leigh said, before she could stop her thoughts from coming out of her mouth.

“I was set up.”

Leigh’s stomach flipped. She took a step back.

The man pulled the dog back and slammed the door.

Just then Crystal bounded out, big smile on her face.

“Where is your grandmother?”

“She’s down with the laundry. She said to go.”

They bowled two strings, then got pizza. Leigh even allowed them to play the machine full of stuffed animals with the mechanical claw. Today was for indulging.

As she watched the giant claw lurch towards them, Leigh suddenly felt terrorized by that maw, opening and closing as it moved towards the toys. She turned away. Another quarter, a new attempt, and finally one little dog dangled at the end of the claw, poised over the other toys, then swept across to the chute, and into the hands of an eager Crystal. Leigh shook herself, then took a deep breath.

On the ride back to Lakeview, Leigh asked Crystal about the man across the hall.

“He has a nice dog,” said Crystal, “but ma said don’t touch.”

“Your mom is right. You need to be careful around dogs you don’t know.”

“I know him! He’s so sweet. I petted him once, but my ma doesn’t know.”

Leigh pulled the car over.

“Crystal, there’s something I have to tell you about that man. He used to live on my street. He’s a bad man, pretending to be good. His dog might be nice, but he’s not. He did some bad to a kid.”

Leigh paused, weighing how much to say. She looked at Crystal tossing her little dog from hand to hand. Her own two children stared idly out the window.

“You need to stay away from him, Crystal, even though the dog is nice. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, miss.”

That night Leigh called the girls’ mother, but she was at work. She sent a note home, asking to meet.

Leigh wrote the homework on the board, as Crystal entered the classroom the following week. She was wearing the Boston Bowl socks.

“Hi Miss! I have the socks on!” Most people dropped the used socks in the donation bin after bowling, but they all kept their socks that day.

Leigh used the moment to remind her about the man.

Will you promise me something?”

“Okay.”

“I want you to promise me not be alone with that man. If you are with your mother or grandmother, it will be okay, but don’t be with him alone. Ever. Promise?”

“Okay, I promise.”

That night she called the girls’ mother again, but this time she was at Bingo. Leigh decided to do a stranger danger lesson with the whole class.

The school year was rushing by, and Leigh’s sadness over the loss of her niece and father was just a dull ache most days. She hadn’t had a panic attack in months.

During Friday circle time one June morning, Crystal shared that she had gone to McDonald’s.

“With who?” Leigh asked.

“My neighbor. We walked there with his dog. I watched the dog while he bought me fries.” She looked at Leigh, with a mixture of apology and defiance.

During lunch, Leigh called the mother again. No answer. That night Leigh couldn’t sleep. She tossed and turned until her mind was made up.

Leigh was up by 6:00am, left a note for her husband, and drove to Lakeview. All dogs need to go out in the morning, she thought. She sat looking at the McDonald’s across the street, wondering if she should chance a cup of coffee, but suddenly there he was, dog in tow.

“I need to talk to you,” she said, in what she hoped was her teacher voice, but was too terrified to really pull it off.

“Not you again.”

“Just hear me out. Crystal is a student in my class. She told me she walked to McDonald’s with you, and you bought her fries. You need to stay away from her, as a registered sex offender. Stay away, or I will report you to the authorities.” Her voice had become shrill, her words stilted, while cold sweat formed on her back.

“I told you, lady. I didn’t do anything. Did you read when I supposedly committed my crime? I was sixteen for Chrissakes!”

He sighed, then gave her a half smile.

“Listen, Crystal is a sweet kid, whose mother is never home. I was nice to her, get it? Nice. Nobody got hurt. Besides, she loves Jackie, here,” he said, ruffling the dog’s fur. Leigh looked at Jackie, at the choke collar laying slack around his neck.

“I mean it. I will know if you see her again. She’ll tell me. So stay away.”

His eyes narrowed, and pulling the dog up by the choke chain till it winced, he stepped closer to Leigh. Inches from her face, he said softly, “Stay the FUCK away from me.”

Leigh held her ground. She thought of all the times she had or hadn’t reported suspected abuse or neglect of her students.

Straightening up her shoulders, she repeated,

“Stay away from Crystal.”

When she got home, she searched through the mess of papers on the kitchen island. The list was folded back onto his page. She reread the description, then went back to the cover sheet with the explanation of levels of offenses. Level 1. Still, he had been convicted.

She put the list in the desk draw, and went to call Crystal’s mother again.