

April 2013 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

Neighbourhood Watch by Natalie Barlow

Jane walked into the spare bedroom and stared at her mother who was crouched in front of the window. Her glasses were perched precariously on top of her head amongst her frizzy grey curls and she was busily taking pictures. “Mum, what are you doing?”

“Getting number plates.”

“Why?”

Her mother, Alice, clicked a few more photos before groping for her glasses and putting them on properly. She put down the camera and picked up a small notebook from the floor. “In case the police ask for them of course.”

Jane moved across the room to peer out the window, trying to see what her mother was looking at. The spare room was on the right side of the house overlooking the driveway. It had a good view of a long stretch of their street as well as the house next door. The street was quiet as usual and she couldn't see anyone in their neighbour's yard. That house was a single story brick veneer like theirs, but built in reverse so their driveways marched side by side. There were two windows facing towards their house, but the blinds were all closed, so Alice couldn't have been looking through those. A couple of cars sat in the driveway, but she wasn't sure if they both belonged to their new neighbour as he hadn't lived there very long, and frankly, cars weren't one of her interests.

Alice grabbed her arm and pulled. “Get down. Someone might see you.”

Jane squatted next to her mother and looked out the window again. “Okay, but there’s no-one there.”

Alice looked at her watch. “There will be soon; they never stay longer than three or four minutes.” She scribbled the time and a registration number down in a small notepad.

“Right, that should do it for now.” She crawled backwards a few steps then got to her feet and wandered out of the room, leaving Jane squatting on the floor in front of the window feeling like a bit of an idiot.

Jane shook her head at being caught out again before getting up and trailing after her mother. She followed the noises towards the back of the house and found her in the kitchen making a cup of tea. “So, I think I missed the middle bit.”

Alice took a sip of her tea, grabbed a cookie from the jar next to the kettle and moved over to the table, taking a seat. “Sorry, what middle bit?”

“You know, the middle bit, where you explain why the police should be asking for random rego numbers.”

Alice took a bite of her cookie before answering. “You never listen to me, or you would already know.”

Jane pulled out a chair and sat down across from her mother. “Maybe not but I think I would have remembered if you had mentioned the police.”

Taking another sip of tea, Alice pulled out her notebook and opened it to the list of numbers and showed it to her. “Our new neighbour is a drug dealer.”

Jane sighed, picked up the notebook and examined it for a moment. It contained a list of car rego numbers with dates and times next to each. “And this shows that how?”

“Because they never stay long. These cars pull up, someone goes into the house, then they come out a few minutes later.”

Jane put the book down and pushed it back across the table. “I’m not sure that makes him a drug dealer.”

“Well what else could it be?”

“I don’t know, but after the hooker incident, I would have thought you would be a bit more careful about jumping to conclusions, especially about criminal activities.”

Alice dismissed the reference to that unfortunate incident involving the prior tenant next door with a wave of the hand containing the half eaten cookie, “Millie thinks he’s a drug dealer.”

Jane rolled her eyes at both the spray of cookie crumbs and the mention of their boarder.

“Millie thinks the mailman is stalking her and hides in the bathroom when she hears his scooter.”

Alice frowned at her. “Just because someone is paranoid, doesn’t mean they’re wrong.

That mailman is definitely a bit shady. He snoops.”

“It isn’t snooping to look back at someone spying at you through the blinds.” Jane abandoned that old argument as a lost cause. “Don’t think you can distract me with the mailman.” She leant forward, trying to catch Alice’s evasive gaze. “I hope you and Millie don’t have any plans to accost our new neighbour. If this keeps up we’ll be the ones on the wrong side of the law. We’re lucky the supposed hooker had a sense of humour.”

Alice placed her tea cup down and stared at Jane. “There is such a thing as civic duty.”

Jane stared back. “There is such a thing as a right to privacy.”

The thump of the mail landing on the table between them broke the deadlock. Jane looked up at their boarder. “Millie, I thought we had that discussion about encouraging mum to spy on the neighbours.”

Millie pulled out a chair next to Alice and sat down, wrapping her cardigan more snugly around her skinny frame. “You told her? I thought you wanted proof first.”

Alice waved her notebook in the air. “I have proof. Twenty cars in the last two weeks, and that is only the ones I saw. The man is definitely a drug dealer. We should call the cops.”

Millie shrank down in her chair and began shaking her head vigorously. “No, no, no, we can’t do that. What if the police are in on it? I’ve watched all the Underbelly series. Our identities could be revealed by a mole on the inside and then we’ll be targeted. They might firebomb us, or break in and murder us in our sleep.”

“Or maybe a drive by shooting,” suggested Alice, warming to this new theme.

“Oh for...” Jane pushed her chair back and stood. “There is no drug dealer. We are not bothering the police again. And you will stay away from next door. I can’t stop you watching and gossiping but please leave me out of it.” She shook her head as she left the two women speculating on which method the drug dealers or their police accomplices would use to dispose of people who ‘grassed’ on them.

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“He doesn’t live there,” said Alice.

Jane straightened up from where she was pulling weeds in the front garden bed, stretched and looked automatically to the right towards the house next door. “Who doesn’t live where?”

Alice squinted at her over her wrap round sun glasses she only wore when in super sleuth mode. “You know who. You looked right over there, so don’t play silly buggers.”

Jane smiled at her mother before turning back to the weeds. “But where’s the fun in that?”

Alice plopped down next to her and flipped open her notebook, pushing it in front of Jane’s face, obscuring her view of the garden bed. “That’s his other address.”

Jane reared back until the book was far enough away from her face so that she could focus on the page. “What makes you think he lives there rather than next door? I mean, he’s here now, I can hear the TV.”

“Yes, and that’s another thing. I saw that TV through the window when I was walking past and it is one of those huge flat screen ones. Those sorts of tellies cost thousands. Most people around here don’t have that sort of money to waste.”

Jane scratched around in the dirt a bit more. “Boys love their toys. They’ll go without decent underwear rather than stint themselves when it comes to gadgets. But a big TV doesn’t make someone a criminal. In fact, if he was living somewhere else, I would think he would have his television there rather than here.”

“He’s probably got dozens of TVs,” said Alice with a hint of envy. “Anyway, Millie saw him running up the road a couple of weeks ago, coming from around the corner. She thought it a bit strange, because he wasn’t in jogging clothes and he arrived next door just as a car was pulling up. So she’s been keeping an eye out from the spare room window and noticed he often appears from around the corner just before a car arrives.”

Jane pulled off her gardening gloves and took the book Alice was still waving in her face. She flicked through the pages that listed their neighbour's comings and goings. "How did you get this other address?"

"Oh, you know..."

"No, I don't." Jane stood up and put her hands on her hips. "Mum, have you been following him?"

Alice pursed her lips and looked shocked at the base accusation. "Of course not. Millie and I often go for a walk to stretch our legs. It just so happened we noticed him coming out of this address on a number of occasions."

"So what you really mean is you have been walking up and down the streets in the direction Millie saw him come from until you spotted him again."

"Well, that isn't following is it," said Alice. "We were in front of him. You can't follow someone from in front."

"But..."

"And let me tell you, it's a much nicer house than that one." She jerked her head in the direction of the run down rental next door. "He's got a big arsed boat and a flash four wheel drive parked in the driveway."

Jane glanced at the beat up wreck of a car that she hadn't seen move from the driveway since it arrived.

"It might be a friend's place."

"That he sleeps at most nights?"

"A close snuggle buddy type friend."

"Snuggle..." Alice laughed out loud. "I think the term is actually..."

“I know what the term is,” said Jane. “Look, that is all very interesting, but it still doesn’t make him a drug dealer.”

“Give me one good possible explanation. One reason why we shouldn’t call the police and dob him in.”

“Dob him in? I thought Millie had you convinced that would end in, well, the end,” said Jane, hoping to stall her mother until she could think of something else to refute Alice’s theory of criminal activities.

Alice began enumerating the different scenarios the two women and discussed and listing the reason why each was unlikely to occur when they were interrupted by sound of a scooter as Millie’s erstwhile stalker drove past. Jane smiled as inspiration struck. “Ebay.”

“What?”

“He could be an Ebay seller and uses this house as his place of business.” She looked again at the address Alice had written down. “It’s easier to find than a small dead end street in that rabbit warren out the back.”

Alice stood there and said nothing for a moment. She then snatched the book out of Jane’s hand and stormed off. “I need more photos.”

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Jane yawned as she stumbled into the kitchen, belting up her dressing gown. Mornings were best approached slowly and with a large cup of tea, luckily she could always count on having the kitchen to herself this time of day. Or so she thought until she noticed Alice and Millie huddled together at the kitchen table. “You ladies are up early.”

Alice turned to Millie. “See, I told you she wouldn’t have heard anything. She’s on the opposite side of the house.”

“I’m on that side and I heard it.”

“Heard what? No, don’t tell me. I need tea first,” said Jane, filling the kettle with water.

“Can I get you one?”

Millie shook her head. “No, no more caffeine for me thanks. I may never sleep again as it is.”

“Me too,” said Alice.

“Me too for tea or for never sleeping?” asked Jane.

Alice straightened in her chair. “No tea, thank you.”

“Right.” Jane put a couple of pieces of bread in the toaster and took out a plate. “Toast anyone?” They both nodded, so Jane pulled out two more plates. Once the toast was served, she sat down at the table with her own breakfast.

Alice was busily munching on her toast, so Jane looked at Millie. “Ok, go ahead.”

“Are you sure you didn’t hear anything last night?” said Millie.

“No, I slept like a top. What was I supposed to hear?”

“The screaming,” said Millie, picking at the crust on her toast.

Jane passed her a knife so she could cut the offending crust off properly. “You screamed? Did you have a nightmare?”

“No.” Millie was starting to look impatient. “I wasn’t screaming, it was next door, at the drug dealer’s house.”

“He was screaming?”

Alice picked up the story from that point. “Yes. No. Well we don’t know who was actually screaming. It was probably one of his customer’s.”

Millie nodded. “Ice.”

Jane finished the last of her toast and dusted her fingers over the plate. “So, someone was screaming ‘Ice’?”

Alice glared at her. “Of course not. It was like that show we saw on TV last month about Ice addicts. The screaming was just like on the program; like someone was being slaughtered.”

Jane took a sip of tea to settle her suddenly queasy stomach. “And you didn’t think to wake me, or call anyone?”

Alice and Millie looked at each other, then away. “You keep telling us to mind our own business, and to leave the neighbours alone,” said Alice.

“And we were scared,” confessed Millie.

“Scared to wake me?” asked Jane.

“No, scared we were right,” said Alice. “Scared he really is a drug dealer. If so, the screams were an out of control addict, or someone was murdering that man, and if we woke you up you would have gone over there.”

“I’m not that brave. I would have called the police. Why didn’t you?”

“Because they probably wouldn’t have come,” admitted Alice, “not after the hooker incident.”

Jane ran her fingers through her hair. “Well, they certainly won’t come now. I’d better go and check it out.” She looked down at her dressing gown. “I’ll go and get dressed.”

Getting up, she left the two ladies whispering together at the table.

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After getting dressed, Jane walked back into the kitchen, expecting her mother and Millie to be there, but the kitchen was empty and the back door was open. “Oh shit,” Jane bolted

out the back door and round the corner of the house, just in time to see the two women knocking on the neighbour's door. Before she reached the end of the drive the door had opened and a young man stood in the doorway. Jane could see Alice was talking, while Millie stood there holding a round tin. The young man nodded to whatever Alice was saying, reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He handed Millie some notes which she put into the tin. Alice kept talking, but the young man was shaking his head. Before Jane could reach them, he had stepped back and closed the door.

Alice and Millie turned and, seeing Jane waiting for them on the footpath, went to join her. "What was that all about?" asked Jane as she shepherded the two women back home. "We thought a couple of old ladies collecting for the local hospital would look less suspicious than someone just walking up to the door asking if they had any Ice addicts in residence," said Alice. The three women walked in the back door and took their customary places around the kitchen table.

"And what exactly have you achieved?" asked Jane through gritted teeth.

"Well, we know he isn't dead," said Millie. "It's a great relief because I wouldn't have slept well if someone had been murdered next door."

"Yes," said Alice. "And I got a peek through the door and the place looks neat. I couldn't smell anything bad either. No vomit, or blood or bleach, so I guess the Ice addict probably didn't die."

"Assuming it was an Ice addict," said Jane. "And not a late night horror movie, or a cat fight or a dying rabbit."

Alice looked at her with pursed lips. "You always think there is a reasonable explanation for everything."

“You have no imagination,” said Millie.

“And you both have too much, so I guess it all balances out in the end.” Jane nodded to the tin. “So how much did he give you?”

Millie opened the tin and pulled out the cash. “Fifty dollars, and he didn’t want a receipt, which just about proves he is a drug dealer. If you don’t declare your income, then there is no point in collecting receipts for tax deductions.”

“Hm, fifty dollars. Well, after your sleepless night, you could probably both do with some pampering. Why don’t you take that fifty, and I will give you another fifty and you can go down to the beauty salon and have your hair done,” suggested Jane.

Alice looked uncertain. “Well we did say it was for the hospital. Wouldn’t that be stealing if we use it at the salon?”

“I’ve met the woman who handles the money collected for the hospital. A good portion of it makes its way into her pocket. I wouldn’t feel guilty about that fifty dollars when the hospital would be lucky to see half.” Jane glanced at the clock. “If you hurry up I will drive you down there now. You can call me when you want to be picked up.”

Looking much more cheerful, Alice and Millie hurried off to get changed into suitable going to the salon clothes.

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Pulling into the driveway, Jane sat in her car for a moment. Getting out, she walked back up the drive and down the path to the house next door. The door was yanked open before she could knock. “What now?” asked the young man.

“Hi, I live next door,” said Jane. “I’m your landlord.”

The young man shifted to pull the door partially closed. “You need an appointment for an inspection.”

“I’m not interested in that.” Jane talked faster, afraid the young man would slam the door in her face before she could say her piece. “Look, we all know what you’re doing here, and frankly I don’t care, except it’s hard to keep places around here tenanted. I had the place vacant for three months because the last tenant got done for running an illegal brothel. It would help me a lot if you could stay off the radar of the local neighbourhood watch and cover your tracks a bit better.”

The young man swallowed. “Neighbourhood watch?”

“Never mind about that. Can I come in? I’ve got a few ideas about how you can look less like a drug dealer and more like an average battler.”

He frowned at her, “Look lady...”

“I am looking, and you need help. All those cars stopping for only minutes, but not delivering anything or picking anything up; it screams illegal activity. You need some sort of cover. And letting your clients use here? That is just dumb. ”

He pushed the door open wider and slowly moved back.

“Have you ever thought about Ebay?” asked Jane, stepping inside.