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The Neighborhood vs Janet

by **R.F. Mechelke**

I remember the day Janet and her family moved into the neighborhood as vividly as I remember the time my mother lanced my first boil. Janet, as far as looks, wasn't all that bad. She was pretty in a plain sort of way. Certainly not off-putting in appearance. Nor was her family a strange looking lot either. To anyone, they would look like any normal family. It was not the way she looked that was alarming. She seemed okay with her kids. At least they weren't a brutish brood. Her husband, James, was a good sort of fellow, too. When after meeting Janet and James, no doubt everyone would walk away thinking, *Geeze, how did that happen?* Sympathy was a word that would seem

to come to mind for James for anyone meeting Janet for the first time. Yeah, it was certainly a mystery.

We were a tight bunch, and we were all concerned about Janet. They moved into the second largest house on the street. Our little neighborhood was one of the older ones of the town. We took pride in our expansive trees that seem to reach toward the moon on clear, bright nights. We had a little park at the west end of the street; unfortunately buttressed up next to James and Janet's house. The park was the place everyone in the neighborhood always ended up in the evening, where our children played dodgeball, baseball, and hide and seek, or whatever else the kids like to play. It was a wonderful place to sit on the benches along the walk that formed the perimeter of the park, sipping our iced tea and lemonades, giving advice about yard work, our kids, or anything else we cared to talk about. Together, we lived through hard times and bad times. We laughed and cried together. We cheered each other on, when it was called for, and we lent an ear or shoulder when it was needed. Like I said, we were a tight knit group.

Sarah and I lived in the largest house of the neighborhood near the center of the street. We had a large patio with a fire pit, where we loved to share evenings with our friends. We would sit around, opening bottles of wine, one after another, as the night air chilled our faces and the darting flames drew us all closer.

Sam, Linda's husband, broke the silence on one of those evenings, leaning toward me, and asked, "Did you meet our new neighbors, James and Janet?"

Just hearing Janet's name, made me visibly wince.

Sam grinned, and said, "Oh, so you have," while lifting his cigarette to his lips and taking a long draw. I watched the embers at the end glow and fade against the black backdrop, and he let loose a cloud of smoke, and added, "Quite a lot to take in with that one, don't you think?"

"I am not sure what to think about James's wife. Never met anyone like her before. Do you know what I mean, Sam?"

Sam took a gulp of his wine, with his face turning a bit serious. His grayish dark hair and height gave Sam the appearance of authority, when in reality, he was a timid man. Maybe timid is a bit harsh. At any rate, he was not an aggressive man. I was never really sure what Linda had seen in him. Anyhow, he was a good man though. He was a lucky man, too. Linda was a real looker. But at this moment, he looked a little uncomfortable.

"You know Sam," I said. "They will likely be here for a while. I mean really, who would want to leave? Not sure how to come to grips with that idea."

Sam leaned back in his chair, and crossed his legs, and took another draw of his cigarette, and opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again. This was typical Sam. He took another gulp of wine, and focused his eyes on my face, with the turning down of his eyebrows, and surprised me, saying, "I don't think we have to do anything."

At the time, I wasn't really sure what to make of what Sam said. He may be a little hen pecked, but he's a smart guy. What happened after that night, still has me flummoxed.

Sheryl, Joe's wife, was working in her yard while their kids were in school. Janet is a stay at home mom too. Actually, now that I think about it, all of the mothers in our neighborhood were stay at home moms. Anyway, Sheryl was planting annuals along her walkway. Janet was walking what we in the neighborhood have been calling, The Beast. It was an English Mastiff, or a small bull. It was brown, with what looked like a five o'clock shadow. You could smell it coming several houses away. One could say it resembled its owner not in appearance, but in the attitude such a large animal would exude. I can see why Janet chose Ralph. When I heard its name for the first time, I thought it was a ridiculous name. Ralph? Imagine saying that name in an affectionate way or with an angered tone or just calling out that name loudly to get its attention. Anyway, back to Sheryl. There she was, minding her own business until Janet came walking by with Ralphie Boy. Sheryl apparently was startled by Ralph. Really, who wouldn't be startled by The Beast? Anyway, Sheryl, on her knees, wearing rather short shorts, as was her way, with her rear staring Ralphie in the face. Well, The Beast yanked on the leash, and with Janet being tiny in stature, probably around 5'2", no more than a hundred pounds, Ralphie broke free, and with beastly glee, ran at Sheryl. Ralph was running rather fast, and bumped into Sheryl, hard, overshooting the proverbial target, as they say, and trampled all of Sheryl's recently planted flowers. Sheryl was laid out in the dirt, with skinned up knees, bleeding and stinging, when Janet ran up and grabbed Ralph's leash. Well, with Janet being Janet, she didn't make the matter



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better. As Michael tells it based on what Cindy told his wife, Julie. Sheryl ran into the house after exchanging words with Janet, and then she had the nerve to continue her walk with The Beast.

Michael and I stood at our shared fence in the backyard. He shook his head after he told me what happened, and I was dumbstruck with a vision in my head.

I shifted my feet, and I asked, "So, she was kneeling down on all fours?"

"That's what Cindy told Julie. She was wearing the really short shorts she has. You know the shorts. The blue jeans pair, with the tiny, thin folded cuffs. Not only that, Cindy told Julie that Sheryl was also wearing a very flimsy, tight fitting red top."

I kicked the fence with my foot. "Yeah, I know that top. How Joe let's his wife outside with that top and shorts, confounds me."

Michael looked around to see if Julie was outside, and said, "Yah, and with the way she's built, that top must have been a sight to see."

Michael only said what I and every other guy in the neighborhood was very much aware of.

Michael could see the smile on my face, and asked, "Are you thinking what I am thinking?"

"If you are thinking about a pool party this weekend, then yes siree, I am."

Michael turned to the house and saw Julie outside, and called out, "Hey, hun, could you get John and me ice cold lemonades?"

Julie was trying to untangle the kids from their bickering, and looked up, when it registered what Michael said, she put on a sweet smile, and called back, "Sure, sweetheart."

Michael turned back smiling in turn, and said, "She's a keeper."

When Julie returned, Michael asked Julie to make the arrangements for the pool party this coming Saturday, and to make sure to invite Joe and Sheryl. Michael gave me a sly wink.

Julie nodded, and asked, "What about our new neighbors, Janet and James?"

I tried to hide my cringing, and Michael looked at me a little confused, and I felt the need to respond on behalf of Michael, so I forced a smile, and replied, "That's an excellent idea, Julie. I think it is time we spend more time with our new neighbors."

As Julie walked back to the house, Michael said, "Thanks, John. I was caught off guard a little there."

"No problem. Who knows, maybe they already have plans."

"We can only hope"

The day of the pool party, Sarah was scrambling around the house trying to get the kids ready. I had to shut the door to my study, so I could read my paper in peace. Boy, raising kids is such hard work. It was a fine day. The sky was blue, and the temperature was perfect. The guys and I were really looking forward to this. Everyone was coming, including Joe and Sheryl. I was bringing all the beer, which reminded me to ask Sarah to get the coolers from the basement.

When I finished my paper, I found Sarah in the living room wrestling with Johnny trying to get his shirt and shoes on, and as she saw me walk up, she pointed to the kitchen, and I saw the coolers already laid out for me, and I said, "Thank you, sweetheart. What would I do without you?"

I loaded the coolers with the ice and beer, and placed them in the Red Ryder Wagon, and stuck my head back through the front door, "I am leaving to Michael's. I'll wait for you and the kids there. Bye babe."

All us husbands were seated around Michael's patio table.

"So, Joe." I said. "We heard what happened to Sheryl. Looks like she's doing okay."

We all turned to watch Sheryl prepare to jump into the pool. She was wearing a violet two-piece suit, with her blonde hair up. We turned back to Joe, who produced a proud smile on his face, and he replied, "She's doing much better. Janet had felt so bad about what happened, she came back to the house to patch Sheryl up after returning her dog home."

Michael and I looked at each other, and I turned back to Joe.

Joe continued, "I think James and Janet should be coming soon."

I asked, "Have you spoken much with James, being he's your next-door neighbor?"

"James? Oh yes, very nice guy. He's a whiz with cars. He helped me with my carburetor just last week."

As Joe was describing how James fixed the carburetor, James and Janet walked through the fence gate unto the patio, with their kids scattering toward the pool. Janet was wearing a white one-piece, with her light brown hair down. We all stood, waiting for Michael to greet them. As Michael was making the introductions, I snuck glimpses of Janet. Michael pulled out a chair for James, and as he thanked Michael, James offered the chair to Janet and he sat in another chair next to her. All us other husbands stood there, looking at each other, not understanding what was happening, so we just sat down with James and Janet.

I offered to Janet that Sarah would get her a glass of wine, and she replied, "You know John, I would rather have one of those beers you got in the cooler next to you."

I must say, I was surprised as hell. I fished for a beer, and as I was about to pop the cap, Janet said, "I can handle that, John. Thank you."

Janet skillfully popped the beer open and took a nice healthy drink from the bottle. She looked around with a satisfied smile, and said, "Wow, that's good beer. Mighty fine taste you have, John."

Janet saw Sheryl in the pool, and said to Joe, "I'm so sorry about what Ralph did the other day. I am not good with that dog. Thank God my brother picked him up yesterday. He and his family were vacationing in Florida for the past two weeks."

James laughed, and said, "Not a moment too soon, right Janet? That beast was driving me crazy, constantly banging into things and tipping things over." Again, Michael and I looked at each other.

Janet continued, "Oh my God, I have to tell you guys, I wanted to murder that dog. I love my brother, but he was real close to losing his so-called best friend."

While I felt uncomfortable with Janet there, sitting and talking with all us guys, I have to say, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.

Janet laughed and talked just like she was one of us, and she was nice. It was nice. And I began to talk and laugh with her. Just like I said, I liked Janet and James the moment I met them.

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