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The
Old

Soft Sell



A
Short
Story

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Neil pulled the car over to the curb. His white, wispy hair strayed gently in the afternoon breeze as he looked up the street. It was a clean, middle-class, suburban neighborhood. Stanleyville Meadows. The yards were a little less trim and the street a might emptier of children than they had once been, but these were different times. Folks weren't quite as out-doorsy nowadays. "Looks perfect," he said. "C'mon boy. Let's go."

He stepped out onto the curb and waited while Barkly sniffed cautiously at the open air and then jumped down beside him. "Feeling lucky today, Barkers? I am." The slender man bent one knee gingerly - got to mind the creases, keep a tidy image - and hunkered down to scratch behind the dog's ears. "Gonna be our lucky day, this'n, ain't it boy?" The dog looked up at him and licked his chin in a way that Neil chose to interpret as agreement.

"Okay then. Let's get at 'er." Neil stood up, smoothed the wrinkles from his pant legs and then strode off down the sidewalk toward his first call.



Gertie Laroche was a feisty old bird. Her kids had been after her for

years to sell and move into a place downtown. They never came right out and said as much, but everybody knew what was meant by a “place.” No, sir. She and her George had built this house, back when they’d been the only ones crazy enough to live this far out. They’d built the house and then built a family to live in it. The kids had all been raised right here and the neighborhood had seemed to grow along with them. First, there had been the McKenzies down the way and then the Olivetti’s across the road. By the time her oldest, Ben, had reached schooling years, the neighborhood was big enough to fill an entire kindergarten class and it had just kept growing from there.

She set the kettle on the stove and was just getting down the tin of Dutch biscuits when the doorbell rang. “Now who can that be in the middle of the day?” she said, but she wiped her hands on her apron just the same and went to see. Gert didn’t hold much with keeping the house all bottled up by day, so the heavy inner door was open and through the storm door she could see a thin, older man standing on the stoop, adjusting his tie in the reflection. Beside him a sad-faced bloodhound sat on his haunches and practiced looking bored - a look raised to the zenith of its perfection on the face of that particular breed. Over the years she’d lost her simple trust of strangers. Why, the things you read about in the paper these days. She stood back a ways and called out loudly. “Yes?”

Neil perked up at the sound of her voice, took note of her apparent age and settled on a tactic. He grinned sheepishly. “I’m sorry to intrude on you on such a fine day as this, Ma’am,” he said, “but I’m looking for an old friend who I believe moved to this area a few years back. I don’t have an exact address though, so I thought maybe I’d ask around and see if anybody can tell me where she lives. Now that I’m here, though, there don’t appear to be any folks out tending to their lawns that I can pass the time with. Do you think you might be able to help?”

Gert wiped her hands again on her apron. "Who'd you say you were?"

"Oh! I do beg your pardon," he said, putting on a fresh coat of bashful. "I didn't say, did I. The name is Dickers, Ma'am. Neil Dickers. And the young lady I'm looking for is Elizabeth Haskins, daughter of my late sister Emily Haskins, God rest her soul. Lizzie'd be in her early forties or thereabouts. Pretty thing, in a handsome sort of way. Least, she was when I last saw her, though that's been some years now." Then he paused, his eyes registering sudden surprise. "My word," he said. "I do believe it's thirty years gone since I actually saw the girl last. How does the time get so far away from us?"

"Indeed," Gert replied. "Elizabeth Haskins, you said? Let me think..." There had been Hendersons over on Culver Street. Ben had played with their boy, Nick. And Tommy had been sweet on the Henley girl for one summer, but Haskins? "No," she said slowly. "I don't recall that there's ever been a Haskins family in the area. And I've been here from the beginning. I'd remember if there had."

Neil smiled. "Well, I do appreciate your taking the time to chat," he said. "I'll be on my way and let you get back to your chores." He turned and slapped his hand against his thigh, calling the dog, who picked himself up and ambled placidly along behind. As Neil walked down the path, he muttered to himself. "C'mon lady. Make the connection..." He didn't have long to wait.

"Oh, Mr. Dickers!" Neil grinned wolfishly, but when he turned around, he was all innocent smiles.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"You said your sister's name was Haskins."

"That's right," he said. "Emily Haskins."

“So Haskins would be the girl’s maiden name then, wouldn’t it?”

Neil allowed a look of embarrassed surprise to warm his face. “You’re absolutely right,” he said. “I’d forgotten about that. She was the traditional sort, too. No doubt she’d have changed her name the minute she married, but I haven’t got any more to go on. I’m afraid I lost touch with my sister for a great many years, and was surprised to find myself named as her executor. Emmy had a memory like a steel trap, though, and it’s making my job a darned sight more difficult than it ought to be. She never wrote down a single address or telephone number. When Lizzie-bye didn’t show up for the funeral, I assumed I’d never find her. Then, just last week, a postcard came for Emmy from some friends vacationing abroad. They said to say hello to Elizabeth, all the way out in Stanleyville.”

In the kitchen, Gert’s kettle began to shriek. She turned to look at it over her shoulder and then back at the man and his dog standing on her front walk. “Can I interest you in a cup of tea, Mr. Dickers? I’ve just put the kettle on.”

“That would be most kind,” he said. “If you’re sure I’m not disturbing your afternoon?”

Gert chuckled. “At my age, having my afternoon disturbed is a rare treat.”

“Then I don’t mind if I do.” He turned to the dog. “Barkly, mind the porch.” As Neil crossed the stoop and entered through the door Gert was holding open for him, Barkly curled himself up at the lip of the top step and went to sleep.

“That’s a very obedient dog you have there.”

“Who, Barkly? Yes, Ma’am. He’s quite a fine animal. Belonged to my dear sister. Point of fact, he’s the other reason I’m trying to find

Lizzie-bye. Once I've delivered the sad news, I thought she might want to have the poor beast, now that her ma has passed. I travel too much to keep him myself and I'm sure she'd want him with her, rather than give him up to strangers."

"I'm sure she will." Gert got the tea and biscuits organized and the two sat sipping their mugs, chatting amiably about the neighborhood and her life there. After a time, they were interrupted by two short yips from the front porch.

"Is Barkly okay?" Gert asked.

"Oh, I'm sure he's fine. Probably just a pair of kids walking by on their way home." Gert was less sure, though, and went to the door to check. When she came back, she had an odd expression on her face.

"You were exactly right," she said. "The two Thompson boys coming home for lunch."

"That'd be right," Neil said. "One yip per person, high pitched for kids and lower for adults. If they'd come onto the property, he'd've added a growl."

Gert looked at her guest strangely, as if she wasn't sure whether or not he was pulling her leg, but she brushed it aside and within moments, was back into her story. She was pouring second cups when, suddenly, she looked up. "Listen to me going on about this town like it was the only place on Earth. You're such a nice man, letting me prattle on like that, but we need to find your niece."

"I'd be obliged for any help you can offer," Neil said, "but I really don't have any more information than what I've already told you. I just can't see how it's enough to work with."

"Well, I've been thinking," Gert said. "Are you any good with data searches? My kids gave me a netpad for my birthday last year. They

keep saying how it's the easiest thing in the world, even for me, being wireless and all, but I haven't been able to get it to do anything useful. Maybe you..." Her voice trailed off hopefully.

Neil sighed and shook his head. "I've never been able to figure any of that stuff out either. Don't seem to have a knack for it."

Gert's face sagged with disappointment.

"But wait a tick." Neil brightened. "I recall reading something about Barkly. It was in Emmy's papers. He's supposed to be real good with data."

"The dog?" Gert said, incredulously.

"Well, he isn't exactly *all natural*, I suppose you'd say," Neil confided. "He's one of those synth jobs. Part dog, part software. To tell you the truth, I was surprised to discover it, myself. He seems so real, but there it was in black and white. State of the art, top of the line Companubot. Still under warranty. Shall we see if he's any good?"

Gert looked uncertainly toward the door. "I don't know," she said. "I've never been keen on animals in the house."

"I know exactly what you mean," Neil said. "But he doesn't shed or, well, mess. So if that's your concern..."

"Really?" Gert said.

"He's been with me for over a month now, and I've never seen him do either," Neil said.

"Well, I'll be." Gert looked again toward the door. "I suppose... You're sure he won't make a mess?" Neil shook his head. "Well then, why don't we give him a try? I'm curious to see what a dog can do that you and I can't."

"Right," Neil said. "You go get your netpad and I'll fetch Barkly."

A few moments later they were settled comfortably in the living room. Gert had her netpad on her lap and Barkly was sitting tall on the floor, looking back and forth between them.

“Now what?” Gert said.

“I don’t know,” Neil said. “Try asking him a question.”

Gert looked around awkwardly for a moment and then spoke, hesitantly at first. She felt a bit foolish, talking to a dog like he was a librarian or some such thing. “Uh, Barkly, has a woman named Elizabeth Haskins ever lived here in Stanleyville Meadows?” As she spoke, she realized that people talked to their pets all the time. It was nowhere near as alienating as typing cryptic messages into some faceless box of plastic and wires had made her feel.

The dog blinked at her with large, moist eyes and then nodded his head toward the netpad on her lap.

The word “No” appeared in the center of the display.

“Is that it?” She looked at Neil.

“Try again,” he said. “Maybe without the last name.”

“Okay. Barkley, have any women named Elizabeth ever lived in Stanleyville Meadows?” The dog whined and flipped his snout at the tablet.

“Limit search to 'Elizabeth' or include variants (Bess, Libby, etc)?”

“Oh, say, that’s a good idea. I hadn’t thought of that. Include the other names as well, please.” After a moment, names began to scroll down the screen. Most of them Gert recognized, but a few were unknown to her. In the end, there were more than thirty.

“I know,” she said, getting a crafty look in her eye as though she was filling in the last square of a black-belt Sudoku. “Barkly, repeat the

last search, but only show the names of women who were not born here and would currently be in their forties. Oh. And include street addresses too, please.”

Three names now appeared at the bottom of her pad.

“Well I’ll just be tickled in the hay,” Gert said. “Barkly is an amazing animal. How much are you selling him for?”

Neil sat back, his eyes wide with injury. “Selling? Mrs. Laroche, I would never presume to come into your home and...”

“Don’t be silly, Mr. Dickers. I have had a thoroughly delightful afternoon and I can’t remember the last time a salesman went to such lengths—to actually take the time to find out what an old body like me would actually want? And then, to show up on my very stoop with as charming and thoroughly useful a product as Barkly here—one that might actually be a help?” She let her voice trail off wistfully.

Neil grinned like a boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Well, I am pleased that you found my company agreeable, Ma’am. And of course, if you’re actually asking me to sell you a Barkly, I do happen to be a licensed representative of Companubot, Inc.”

“I thought you might be,” she said. “Shall we discuss the particulars over pie?”



“Freeze display.” A tall man in a dark gray suit got up from his desk and stepped around it to examine the scene now in freeze-motion on his wall.

“Amazing,” he said. “This Dickers fellow doesn’t look like much, but he’s real smooth. He actually got her to make the ask herself. And she didn’t seem to mind the deception in the slightest. Incredible.”

The other man, who was standing against the unlit back wall, near the projector, nodded. “That’s right, sir. Not only did Neil close the sale, but Mrs. Laroche called every friend she had and told them the whole thing. Not just about Barkly, but about Dickers himself and his low pressure approach. In the last three weeks, she’s made eleven more sales for him. Meanwhile, he’s planted the Companubot flag in six more neighborhoods just like Stanleyville Meadows. With similar results.”

“Go figure,” the tall man said, shaking his head. “Who knew the low pressure, folksy approach could be so effective? What’s his secret?”

“Secret, sir? He says it’s just taking the time to get to know your customer. Learn their needs and treat ’em like regular, respectable folks, rather than like walking bank-accounts with psych profiles.”

“Hmph! New age hooey if you want my opinion, but no point in arguing with results. We could really use a guy like that. What’ll it take to get him?”

The other man grinned and stepped forward, his white, wispy hair straying in the air-conditioned breeze. “I’m glad you asked me that, sir. Mr. Dickers is our hottest selling series, but I can have three units here in a week. Shall we discuss terms?”

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