Blessed Are the Innocent

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Elizabeth Hilden reached over and switched on her gray Zenith radio. She enjoyed listening to station WKO because Paul Korman gave news reports in the morning, noon, and midevening. Korman’s voice was a deep, vibrant baritone and in resonating from the small pocket transistor, it filled the room and warmed her; she felt like Paul was an old friend. She had a familiarity with his rhythmic voice that could sense good or bad news before he spoke it. She thought it was uncanny; friends thought it was naive.

“. . . and soy bean futures are predicted to show mixed but active trading. We’ll have another stock market report at 1:10 this afternoon.

Area police are continuing their search today for an escaped mental-”

Click.

“Oh goodness,” she said aloud to no one, “I wonder where Teddy is.”

Teddy was her companion—a small, yellow male cocker spaniel with a huge, red, lolling tongue that seemed to hide the bottom half of his face. Elizabeth methodically let the dog out of the house each morning at 6:45 a.m. Usually, he was scratching to be let in again by 7:10; it was now nearly 8:00.

With one hand, she gathered the thin cotton nightgown (a faded print with flowers) around her throat while grasping the arm of the chair with her other hand. A slight grunt and she lifted herself and began striding through the
hallway to the kitchen and out to the back door. She was 63 years old, and gray colored her hair, but her solid frame was still sound, strengthened by childhood on a farm and work in a produce plant. She liked to consider herself as looking proud and independent while neighbors viewed her as matronly.

She angled her face against the screen, darting her eyes back and forth across the back lot. Unlatching the door, she stepped out into the morning calm, gazed into the narrowing shadows, and called softly.

"Teddy."

No answer. There was really no need to whisper here; the closest neighbor lived near the opposite end of the block. Elizabeth had helped her husband, George, build their house more than 35 years ago. They had chosen this very site because of the privacy, and although the house was now scarred with peeling paint and new homes were slowly creeping up, enveloping the remaining space left, she still enjoyed the solitude and woodland atmosphere.

The neighbors had also changed through the years. Her close friends were all gone now—dead, moved to the Southwest and warmer climates or to nursing homes. Her neighbors now she envisioned with suspicion and their children with absolute fear. Although these well-scrubbed children were young, most just barely ten years old, they were clannish, and she refused to take her evening strolls now with gangs of them (she was sure) roaming the area at night. She regarded the parents with distrust, knowing they were obviously after something of hers—she recognized their fawning ways, the unnatural "hellos" they gave in town. The children laughed at her behind her back, she knew; she felt like a marked person, someone singled out by them ever since she refused to contribute to that silly heart fund drive last November. Didn't they know her social security checks weren't that large? Money wasn't as plentiful now that George was gone.
George had been a carpenter and a good man, she reflected . . . oh, those were the good years when he was around and . . .

Elizabeth paused by the southeast corner of the house and looked up. The two outer kitchen windows were in jagged pieces; large, heavy shards of glass outlined enormous holes where large rocks had been hurled. It had happened two nights ago—a piercing shattering in the dark at about 11:30. She just knew the neighborhood youths were behind it. The next morning she had even found new footprints pressed into the dewy ground. Rather large, she had thought, guessing them to be about a size 10 shoe, but with the way kids grow up today . . .

She had not reported it to the police. Rather, Elizabeth wished to capture the culprit and expose his identity to his parents. That would bring sure justice. Thus determined, she bided her time, waiting and expecting him to strike again.

He did, just last night. She was awakened around 2:00 a.m. by a frenzied rustling and heaving sound outside. Teddy was at the back door, scratching and barking relentlessly, trying to get out. Elizabeth threw on a housecoat, ran for the back door, and threw on the yard-light. Unlocking the door, she rushed out—and was met by silence. Hurrying along another 25 feet, she stopped suddenly and heard a muffled thud land beside her front yard fence. She turned and listened to the flapping of tennis shoes against the pavement. One pair of feet, two, four, six or seven pairs of feet; she couldn’t distinguish, so quickly the sound had disappeared down the street.

She stood now in the growing sunlight and surveyed the damage. Her flowerbed of chrysanthemums—trampled into the ground. The hours and years she had spent with George cultivating these plants went streaking through her mind. The blooms were crushed, stomped into the black peat, petals ripped off and coating the
Sketch

grass. The few stalks still standing looked oddly bare. She walked silently around the patch, looking in and around the clumps of twisted plants. Stopping by one bunch, she noticed a small golden ringlet. Heart skipping, Elizabeth stooped, lifted back the tangle of plants, and looked directly upon the battered remains of Teddy. She touched the crushed yellow body, still warm, and mused how he must have dragged himself this far. The big red tongue, now covered with dirt, lay still beside his head.

She quietly covered him with brush, stood, and wiped her hands against her nightgown. Tears welling in her eyes, she looked quickly around, all the time fighting to control the nausea.

"Those damn kids," she mumbled. "'When will they ever learn!'" She ran back into the house, slamming the door.

Elizabeth sat stiffly in her chair, pleased with herself as she stared out the window, watching the afternoon sun's rays slowly stretch and fade from behind the huge maples across the street. The afternoon had gone so perfectly. She kept reviewing the incidents to relish the experiences further.

By luck this morning while striding resolutely downtown to contact the sheriff, she had met (unescapably, she had thought) three of the neighborhood youths. Reacting in their usual pretentious ways (she observed), they had all primly spoken in broken chorus, "Good morning, Mrs. Hilden."

She was trapped then, of course, and must say something. An idea sprang into her head as she returned their greeting—and suddenly invited them to a party. It would be a . . . birthday party for herself, and at her house, and would they please invite their other little friends in the neighborhood? She had sworn them to secrecy so it would be just their little group, because, of course, some parents just wouldn't understand. Elizabeth had then gone on her way (disregarding her plan to see
the sheriff), and she remembered with delight how she had picked out hats, decorations, and ... ice cream!

The scenes crowded each other, replaying over and over in her mind. Oh, they had had a good time. No question about that. Raucous laughter had filled the house and had only calmed with their leaving, not twenty minutes ago. She smiled and recalled the directions on the sides of the cartons she had used: "Can be used as granules or in liquid form. For mice and other small rodents use one and one-half teaspoons in small protected containers. For rats use three teaspoons in open containers." And for adolescents and pre-teens, she chuckled and thought to herself, use six cartons and mix thoroughly with . . .

Elizabeth reached over suddenly to turn on the news. WKO came blaring out with Paul Korman already started with his newscast. Elizabeth looked around the room and considered the mess to be cleaned up.

"... and police today at noon in conjunction with local mental health officials announced the capture of an escaped mental patient, Richard Langley, who authorities claim has been responsible for numerous acts of vandalism in this area recently. At least seventeen related reports of malicious damage have been received by the police, involving broken windows, slashed automobile tires, household lawn damage, and injuries to family pets. Langley is being returned tonight to the state . . ."

Click.

Images flashed. Elizabeth stood up, distraught, and walked quickly out to the kitchen. She looked out through the window, past the gaping holes, and scanned the yard. The trees, the lawn, even the trampled flowers were quiet. Her face contorted, and she began to cry. Elizabeth knew she was leaving.