

The Neighborhood Watch

It began with some acts of vandalism — eggs tossed, bicycles stolen or borrowed might be a better word. Taken and ridden around for a day, then abandoned elsewhere on the island. Nothing serious, but we'd never had anything like this before so people talked about it. We're that kind of community. We chat about people's lives, worry about an approaching storm, or a fire that isn't under control. Now we talked about these misdemeanors.

When the robberies started later in the season, we believed that the same individuals were involved. Not many robberies; just a few. Someone slipping in through a window left open. Teenagers, we assumed. A few things were taken — some money, some gold chains. Not much. Most people leave what they value back in the city. This island, and Sea Breeze in particular, is a place of open doors, kids running in and out. Sand everywhere. On your toothbrush, in your sheets. Nobody ever locks up at night. Until then nobody gave it a second thought.

Then some strange things happened. Maddy Sorenson woke up one night when Scott was on the mainland and saw a naked man outside her window. And the Mitchell twins, two identical leggy girls with long cornsilk hair, spotted a man, perhaps the same one, peering in from their deck as they dressed for bed. After the incident with the twins people began to talk.

"We must do something," Julia Lavine said at our annual Fourth of July picnic at the fire station. She stood, tall and slender, clasping her hot dog in a raised fist. Her delicate, sensual bones and creamy skin were protected from the sun under a large wide-brimmed straw hat. Not many people can pull off a hat like that but Julia Lavine could. She laughed that way women laugh when they know that they are admired. Or even envied, some might say.

Cynthia, the mother of the twins, agreed that something might be done, but none of us were sure what that "something" might be. There's no police on the island and only one sheriff who gets around

by water taxi. My husband, Dan, and I have summered here as long as anyone and there's never been a major crime. No one's ever been raped or murdered or even held up at gun point.

"We have to look out for one another," Julia said. Her house wasn't that far from ours and I knew that she was often alone because Ted traveled so much. It was Julia's idea to start a neighborhood watch. We didn't know much about what this would entail, but Julia did. She'd once lived in a gated community in Southern California. She said it in a way that made her sound important and mysterious. "You have to talk to the police," she told us. Then Julia offered to make the call.

The following Saturday a policeman in powder blue shirt sleeves and a farmer's tan stood on a raised platform at our fire station. He had brought with him a chart and a pointer, telling us what to be careful of and what to watch for. He had a thick Long Island accent, and his badge read Officer Rodgers. "If a person," he said in such a way that it sounded like poison. "If a person has left his or her window open, if a security light is out . . ."

Dan nudged me. "A poison?" He sat beside me, twirling his racquet in his hands. I'd had to drag him there.

"Quiet," I said.

"If newspapers or mail is piling up in front of the house, let your neighbor know. Don't be shy," the officer told us. "Omission leads to commission. And by that I mean the commission of a crime."

There was a tittering in the room. "Is he kidding?" someone said. A shush came from Joe Perkins, the head of our community council. But Officer Rodgers seemed oblivious.

"What to look for in a perp." Officer Rodgers used his pointer to get to the next topic. On the board was a picture of a person, wearing a mask, crawling into a window. He said perp as if we were all supposed to be thoroughly versed in the language of perps. As if we stayed up every night watching CSI. There was a rumbling in the room as Annie Hatley asked her husband, "What's a perp?"

Overhearing her, Officer Rodgers said in a very officious way, "That's police talk for a perpetrator, Ma'am. Anyone suspicious. Anyone who doesn't belong in your area who is seen on more than one occasion. Anyone asking directions or for personal information such as 'Where