

A NEW NEIGHBOUR

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“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone,
and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

GALATIANS 6:10

Lucy was grateful for her big brother’s company. She and Paxton had done the walk from the school bus stop to their new home only once with their parents, but since Paxton was already a teenager, their parents trusted him to get his little sister home safe.

Sadly, Lucy didn’t like their new neighbourhood. She missed having her grandma down the hall in their old apartment building and now their new house was a whole two hours away. Lucy remembered her dad excitedly explaining that the new place came with a yard and a garage, but she didn’t care. She didn’t like that their street was so quiet compared to their busy apartment. And she didn’t like that every house looked identical – except for one.

Lucy had first spotted the odd house when their dad drove them to see their new home. Squeezed between a dozen of the same cookie-cutter houses with white picket fences, it sat behind an overgrown hedge and a chain-link gate that ran the width of the driveway. Lucy’s mom had muttered that the property stood out like a “sore thumb,” and she’d heard her dad whisper back, “It’s creepy.”

Lucy decided she wouldn’t trust that house either. Beyond the old gate that looked like it was never opened there was a cracked driveway with a zigzag of weeds leading through the shadows to a dark grey house and empty carport.



“Can we cross the street?” Lucy asked her brother when they were five houses away from the end of the sidewalk.

“Why?” Paxton asked, clearly annoyed by the demands of his little sister.

“I don’t like that house.”

“It’s just a house.”

“Please? Can we just cross?”

“But our house is two down from the creepy house.”

“See! Even you think it’s creepy!”

Paxton rolled his eyes and checked the street before pulling on his sister’s backpack to guide her to the opposite sidewalk. Lucy tried not to look back at the house, but from this perspective, she saw even more of the darkened driveway beyond the chain-link gate.

For weeks Lucy and Paxton crossed the road on their way home from school to avoid the creepy house. And for weeks Lucy noted that nothing much happened on the other side of the gate. Sometimes the shadows played tricks on her mind but when she’d blink and look again, everything *seemed* normal. Still, if her parents couldn’t trust the creepy property then neither could she.

Then one day, Lucy saw something behind the chain-link gate: two glowing eyes surrounded by black fur

in the shadows. She tried to blink them away, but they remained, watching her from the darkness. She whipped her head to stare at her feet and prayed God would protect her and Paxton.

The next day, this pattern repeated. Five houses before the end of the sidewalk, Lucy and Paxton crossed the street, and when Lucy glanced across the road at the creepy house, there were the glowing eyes.

Every day for weeks, it was the same. The eyes were always in the same spot. Some days Lucy thought the eyes glowed red. Other days she thought she could see sharp white teeth and hear a growl. Paxton never seemed to notice.

Then, on a beautiful sunny Tuesday, Lucy was stopped in her tracks as soon as they crossed the street. She saw it. It was a dog. Even though it was out of the darkness of the hedge, it still looked like a shadow. Pure black fur from snout to tail and bigger



than she'd imagined. Even though the dog was just sitting there, she was certain if it stood up on its hind legs, it would be as tall as her dad. She elbowed Paxton but all he said was, "Oh," without breaking his stride.

On Wednesday, the dog was there again, this time even closer to the chain-link gate. Still staring at them. Thursday it watched. Friday it watched.

When they drove to church on Sunday past *the house*, Lucy courageously looked from inside the car but couldn't see anything.

But on Monday, it was there again. This time the dog was lying down, its huge black snout resting between two enormous paws. Lucy took a deep breath and decided not to look at her feet. She watched the dog watching her. And as Lucy and her brother walked on the other side of the street, she noticed the dog had two little grey eyebrows that twitched. On Tuesday, Lucy felt braver, and she held eye contact with the dog the whole span of the driveway. On Wednesday, she saw both its eyebrows twitch *and* its tail brush back and forth on the cracked concrete. This continued for another few weeks.

Then, just after Remembrance Day, the first snow fell. It started slowly at noon so by the time Lucy and Paxton were walking home there was only a few centimetres on the sidewalk. They crossed the street like they normally did, but this time Lucy didn't see any glowing eyes or black fur or big snout. She did see a bunch of huge pawprints along the edge of the gate, as if the dog had walked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and then up the dark driveway.

A week later the snow was gone, and the dog was back. This time he was lying along the gate, facing the direction of the school bus stop. Lucy saw his black fur sticking out between the chain link of the gate and when they crossed, he popped his giant head up, twitching his eyebrows and swaying his tail.

The next day, Lucy told Paxton, "Let's not cross the street today."

Paxton turned his head in surprise. "We should still cross the street, Lucy. It's safer."

"I'm not going to cross the street."

"Suit yourself."

Paxton crossed the street and Lucy whispered a prayer of protection as she hoisted her backpack a little higher and put one foot in front of the other. Four houses away. Three houses. Two houses. One house. She saw the black fur against the gate move when she was nearly eye to eye with the beast. The dog's tail was wagging faster than she'd seen before and his grey eyebrows were twitching, but Lucy was frozen. They stared at each other for what felt like an eternity and then the dog tilted his head down and flopped his giant body onto the ground. Eyebrows still twitching. Tail still wagging. Lucy found her feet and moved on.

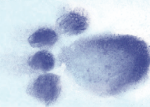
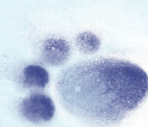
The next day Lucy and the dog did the same dance. When she drew alongside him on the sidewalk, he stood expectantly, and then flopped down again, as if to make himself smaller than her.

Paxton still crossed the street, but now when Lucy walked the length of the gate, she talked to the furry shadow. "Hello. My name is Lucy. I'm trying to be brave. I thought you were scary. But maybe you're not. I like your eyebrows."

At the beginning of December there was another snowfall – this time a big one. Lucy and Paxton were prepared with snowpants and snow boots and walked along the freshly cleared sidewalk. As usual, Paxton crossed the street, but when Lucy reached the chain-link gate, there was snow up to her knees. And no dog.

The next day was the same. There was no sign of him – not even pawprints.

After a week of this, Lucy had an idea. She went to her room and grabbed her art supplies. She drew the dog as best as she could – fluffy tail, grey eyebrows, long black snout. On the back of the paper she wrote,



Hello. My name is Lucy and I live down the street. I have seen your dog every day after school, but now he's gone. I used to be scared of him. But now I miss him. Is he okay?

And then Lucy drew a box to check for YES and a box for NO. She found a giant plastic baggie in the kitchen and tucked her note into it, then bundled herself up and ran out the front door. Using one of her hair clips, she attached the note to the other side of the gate and ran back home.

Lucy checked for three days in a row on her way home from school – no response. But when she ran over on Saturday morning, she spotted boot prints in the snow and a new plastic baggie. Her note was gone but there was a folded piece of lined paper with scribbly font that looked a lot like her grandma's handwriting. Lucy ran back home with the note clutched in her gloves and brought it to her mom for help deciphering what it said. The note read:

Hello Lucy,

My name is Dorothy. My friends called me Dot. One of my friends was named Lucy – isn't that funny?

I'm sorry you were scared of my dog. He looks unfriendly, but he's actually very kind. My husband got him 10 years ago when he was just a puppy. We thought he was so beautiful we decided to name him Beau.

I don't want you to be worried. Beau is just fine. He and I are a little old, and when the snow comes, our arthritis flares up, so we stay inside where it's warm. Right now, as I write this, he's lying by the front door whining. It's Friday afternoon just after 3 p.m. For the last few months, I've seen him waiting at the gate every school day from 2:30 to 3:30 p.m. Now I know why. He was waiting for his friend.

I'm going to include my phone number. Please tell your parents they can call me if they think that's

appropriate. I'm sure Beau would love a visit. And I wouldn't mind some company as well.

Thank you for your kindness. You are a very thoughtful young lady.

*God bless,
Dot*

That Sunday afternoon, just a few days before Christmas, Lucy, Paxton, her mom and her dad drove home from church and parked in their driveway. Lucy ran inside to get the plate of cookies she'd made with her mom the day before, along with a special dog treat they found at the store. They then made their way down the sidewalk to Dot's house.

Together, they crossed the threshold of the chain-link gate. As they walked up the long driveway, Lucy heard her parents talking about how they could help Dot and they made a plan to shovel the driveway that afternoon. At the end of the driveway, behind the overgrown hedge, they found a green – not grey – house. Lucy rang the doorbell. The door opened and there stood a woman who looked like one of her grandma's friends, and beside her stood Beau. When he saw Lucy, Beau tilted his head down and laid himself on the welcome mat – eyebrows twitching, tail wagging.

