



GOLDIE, AND THE THREE BEARS

Phil Parker

I'd just finished nailing a sign to the tree, "Beware of squatters". Nobody would read it, the whole thing was a waste of time but the local council wanted their backs covered, I served a litigious community. My phone warbled. To be precise, it was more of a croak. A sound effect I'd downloaded as a joke, my boss resembled a huge toad and this ringtone matched him perfectly.

'Get down to Myrtle Avenue. There's another one. Don't fuck this one up either.'

I wondered if all toads were equally as communicative. Probably not. I bet they sat on their lily pads croaking away happily to anyone that happened to be listening. I sauntered to my car and hurled the rest of the posters onto the back seat, to join the rest of the clutter and the broken handcuffs. I needed to spray Fabreze to get rid of the stench of drunken troll.

I snorted the last of my humour away as the ringtone's value diminished and my resentment of Gerry Sanderson took its place. It wasn't only me that saw the toad resemblance, the whole squad joked about it. They'd all downloaded the ringtone too. Shift briefings were now filled with puns alluding to his appearance. Les Badger, who had his own problems where branding was concerned, had quipped that we shouldn't toady up to our boss. Sally Hutchings reiterated the joke there were no flies on Mr Sanderson and somebody else asked why he didn't wear open-toad sandals. All the guy did was to eye all of us suspiciously, which was off-putting when they bulged out of his sockets because of his thyroid problem. Hence the toad reference.



I started the car and sighed. I had no idea what challenge waited for me on Myrtle Avenue but that was the boss' way of getting back at me. With nothing to go on I'd fuck it up for sure and then he'd be able to put me on another disciplinary warning. Bastard. There was something about the road name that bugged me too but I dismissed it.

My depressed mood matched the landscape. That's pathetic fallacy for you. Since the invention of the internet and the subsequent drop in book sales, the whole area had

deteriorated. That's what happens in any fictional world I suppose. Poverty wasn't just a neighbour, it had turned into a lodger who wouldn't leave and liked to ruin every aspect of life. Some houses had been repossessed and quickly became home for those who couldn't afford one. The lack of electricity and running water didn't matter, shelter from the cold and the rain did. Survival meant compromising with your expectations.

Of course, the banks didn't see it that way. They wanted their properties free of invaders so they could sell them on. As if anyone would want to live in a land where Hope had packed its cases and moved to Genre Fiction. That was when they phoned us. It was easier to leave the police to sort everything out for them. The courts took too long, the solicitors took too much money and the banks were too impatient. Better for the police to hassle and badger the miscreants into moving on, to another property obviously. One that hopefully belonged to someone else.

That was why I was surprised when I arrived on Myrtle Avenue.

There was no bored, complacent representative from the bank waiting for me. There was a man, a woman and their teenage son. A family.

I got out of the car to be circled by three irate faces who wanted me to do something immediately. Their outrage was palpable. How could someone wreck the home they'd worked so hard to build and equip? What gave them the right? After all, they were a law-abiding family who kept themselves to themselves, paid their taxes and helped at charity events. They were, they insisted, good people. I didn't doubt it. They'd been unlucky, that was all it was. They'd left the house to go for a stroll, a sponsored walk for the local church apparently.

They'd returned to find their home trashed.

'We made a citizen's arrest!' the teenager beamed with pride. 'I did the tying up!'

The father smiled a little awkwardly at his son. 'Shh, Teddy. Let the officer deal with everything. Now the authorities take over.'

It wasn't something the lad was happy about clearly, he adopted the traditional teenager reaction, he sulked.

'But you said. You said there had to be punishment.'

Dad's face flushed, Mum yanked the boy towards her and glared at him but he was too resentful to notice. Mr Behr watched my reaction, when he didn't get one his embarrassment deepened.

'What I meant, Teddy, is that the authorities will see to the punishment, not us.'

I worried what I was going to find in the house. The rise of vigilantism had risen significantly in this neighbourhood in recent months.

'Shall we go inside?' I made sure my question sounded more like an instruction. 'Let me see what damage has been caused.'

Husband and wife exchanged looks. That wasn't good. It made me wonder how this was going to pan out when I reported everything back to the Toad. He hated vigilantes, it made his team look bad and that made him angry. Truth was, it wasn't only the vigilantes that were responsible. He'd been promoted beyond his capabilities and wasn't up to the job.

Yeah, I know. He'd leapfrogged his rivals.

The door handle had been forced. Mr Behr was keen to point that out to me. Proof, beyond any shadow of a doubt, of forced entry. He pushed the door open and invited me to



enter first. He was a big man, Mr Behr. All hair and a lot of muscle going to fat, probably an ex-bodyguard who'd once protected some king or wizard. Through the forest on his face, large brown eyes watched me. They held no respect, only barely contained anger. If I didn't get this right, it wouldn't only be the Toad I'd upset.

His wife was right behind me, already muttering resentfully about the chaos of her beautiful house. She wasn't that much smaller, a woman used to heavy manual labour, going by the biceps. There was the beginnings of a moustache forming on her top lip.

It wasn't a big house, one room with a kitchen at its far end. The furniture wasn't fashionable, I doubt it ever had been, all the same, it was broken. A table was on its side, wooden chairs smashed into kindling. Cheap pottery had been relegated to small shards. All except for three bowls positioned on a worktop in the kitchen.

The lad, Teddy, pointed at them with a sullen expression.

‘Mum had made lunch for when we returned, it just needed microwaving. But you should see what was done to it...’

Mrs Behr hugged her son to her ample midriff and nodded with a sadness borne of someone whose pain knew no end. The kid shared the same musculature and the moustache too.

‘Where are the perpetrators?’ I asked. Mr Behr nodded to the staircase.

‘Only the one. Upstairs.’

I groaned with the silent regret every police officer makes from time to time. You mentally prepare yourself to confront something that’s going to either churn your stomach, upset you emotionally and perhaps even both. I climbed each step as if I was approaching the scaffold.

The bedrooms were in the roof space, separated only by the wooden staircase. On one side a single bed had been trashed, gadgets and teenage boy paraphernalia scattered everywhere and in little pieces. The adults’ room was no better, the bed leaned awkwardly with a broken leg and items littered the floor.

In the centre of the room, bound in rope as thick as my wrist, was a girl.

Blood flattened her golden hair to her skull and dripped down her face, over the bruises already turning purple. One eye was swollen shut. She used the other to watch our progress towards her, it held no fear, even though she was half the size of the woman at my side. They’d gagged her with a filthy piece of rag, she glared at me with defiance, I marvelled how one eye could express such intensity. She must have put up one hell of a fight, or the three of them took out their temper on her.

And yet something didn’t feel right.

Why would one girl trash a house like this? And get caught doing it? Then came the question from the scowling woman who remained at my side.

‘We will need a crime reference number, so we can make an insurance claim.’

The flick of the man's eyes to his wife confirmed it for me. It was a big enough gesture to silence the woman as if she'd clapped a hand to her mouth to register her mistake. The man smiled at me, at least his lips formed the shape, there was certainly no humour there.

'This little bitch can't be allowed to ruin everything we've worked for.'

I untied the gag, despite the protestations of the whole Behr clan. I expected a tirade of abuse but instead I received one softly spoken word of gratitude. As I did the same to the ropes, the complaints intensified, the big bear of a man stepped towards me, the gesture was obvious but I chose to ignore it. And hope I'd made the right decision.

'I can't take her to the station tied to your chair, can I?' I said calmly.

With grudging acceptance, he stayed where he was and glowered at me then at the girl, who continued to say nothing. Everything about this situation sounded alarm bells in my head yet I had nothing firm to go on. I let the rope fall to the floor as the girl rubbed her wrists and the three Behrs scowled and frowned.

'I'll need you to come to the station and make a statement,' I said to the man. 'You can get your crime reference number after that.'

Another flicked glance at his wife.

'Can't we do that here? Now?'

I shook my head. 'Need to get her to the station, make my report.' And then, on a whim, left just enough of a gap before continuing. 'And interview her.'

The mother growled. It was a bass guttural sound from her throat that sounded positively feral.

'What do you need to do that for? You can see what she's done.'

I awarded her my best disarming smile. 'I need to know why she did it.'

The flab around the woman's jowls vibrated. 'Who cares? She's like all the other no-good, lazy-good-for-nothings that infest this town. They're fucking criminals. If you ask me, they need to be put up against a wall and shot.'

Her husband's eyes willed her to shut up but it was only as her temper reached combustion point that she realised she'd gone too far. She back-tracked instantly, tried to turn it into a joke but the boy's expression told me even he knew things were going wrong.

I took the girl's arm, she stood up without complaint and came with me to the staircase, followed by the family. I could hear their whispered argument and felt the animosity they shared towards each other now. As we reached the bottom step the girl stumbled, clung on to me as her legs buckled. Her face was pale, her breathing shallow, she was in more pain than I'd first realised.

'Are you all right? Do you need to sit down?'

She shook her head resolutely, she had her eyes on the front door.

'What's your name by the way?'

'Georgia Locke.' Her sapphire-blue eyes found mine. 'My father used to call me Goldie.'

The tumblers fell into place, suddenly everything was clear. We were by the front door, my car was only a short distance away. My alarm grew as I heard a heavy sigh behind me. They'd heard what the girl had said. Nonetheless, I asked the question.

'Patrick Locke? The inventor?'

She gave me the slightest of nods, her head turned slightly to assess what was happening behind us. Man and wife stood on the threshold of the house, indecision etched on their faces. I could see the questions running through their minds. Had I made the connection? And if I had, would I make the link between the old man and his apprentice who'd initially been a suspect for his murder. The killer had never been caught. Not surprising, Gerry Sanderson, with ironic toad-like behaviour, had turned a blind eye to the case. He'd dismissed it as a robbery gone wrong, the old man had kept a small amount of money in his workshop and it had vanished.

With that memory came another. Now I knew why Myrtle Avenue rang bells. It had been the street where the old man lived. The girl, who was almost too weak to walk and leaned against me, had come home. Only to find someone else had claimed its ownership.

‘We’ll be in touch,’ I said as I strolled down the path to my car with deliberate nonchalance. ‘So you can call in to the station to make your statement.’

Three faces glared at me. I opened the door for the girl to get in my car.

‘Oh, one more thing. You’ll need to bring along the property deeds for your insurance claim. To prove this is your home. You know how it is these days, people claiming things that aren’t theirs.’

That forced exchanged looks of the shiftiest kind.

‘And fingerprints probably too. To rule you out of having caused the damage.’

That was utter rubbish but it unnerved the trio even more. Then, for my coup de grâce, I called out my final jibe as I climbed into the driver’s seat. I accompanied it with my very best professional smile.

‘I should point out, if this young lady were to make the accusation that you’d assaulted her, we’d need to investigate that more thoroughly. You know, look into the background of her claim. See if you had any motives for wanting to harm her. This house used to belong to her father. There were rumours he hid details of his inventions in it.’

Their faces grew darker with every word I uttered but it was the kid who dashed back into the house first, no doubt to continue their search.

‘But if you’ve got all the documentation and can prove you have no prior connection to Patrick Locke, such as once being his apprentice, then you’ll be fine.’

I drove off. Or at least turned a corner and waited. Sure enough, the car that had been in the Behr’s drive, flew past the end of the road. Good thing I’d recorded its number plates so I could put out an all-points bulletin for it to be stopped and the perpetrators brought in. I smiled into the rear-view mirror.

‘Let’s get you to the hospital, miss. Get those wounds treated. Then we can start sorting out some justice for you.’