The Missing

By: Michelle Hanshew

What's the difference between being seen as paranoid and being seen as perceptive? Is it based on acceptance? Is it a matter of one's standing in the community, amongst one's peers, or simply carrying the biggest stick? I wish I knew. It would make convincing my neighbors so much easier, but they're starting to think I'm nuts. Hell, if they saw the inside of my house at this point they'd run for the nearest phone. As it is, I try to be as noticeable as possible, complaining to the neighbors how much renovations cost as I carry lumber and power tools into the house. The one thing that I've learned from social interaction is that if you bitch about something long enough, people will be almost afraid of bringing the subject up. So far it's worked; I've boarded up the first floor windows, as well as the one above the porch, all without visits from nosy neighbors. Not that I've got many anymore – neighbors, that is.

The whole thing started maybe half a year ago. On my way to work I noticed that the people a few houses to the south weren't there anymore. It wasn't that their car was gone, it was that the windows were boarded up, like there had been a fire there. The thing was, I knew there hadn't been a fire – I'm not that deep of a sleeper. The last time any sirens even came close to the neighborhood was last year, when old Mrs. Phelps had a heart attack. When I got home that afternoon, I asked the guy next door about it, but he hadn't heard anything either. The entire family had disappeared without a peep. Within a week even their permanent collection of toys had disappeared from the lawn, and the only proof that anyone had lived there at all was an old oil stain on the driveway.

The next few weeks were fairly quiet. The mystery behind the neighbor's disappearance was explained away by theories of foreclosure, sick relatives, and fleeing debt collectors. When the boarded up windows were brought up, there were only shrugs and the topic was changed. Everything was starting to go back to normal when the same thing happened to the house across the street. I knew the woman and her two sons well enough to know that there were financial issues, but nothing that would force them to leave in the middle of the night. Even if things were worse than they had let on, who goes through the trouble to board up their windows before they leave? After a few days of looking at their empty house, I finally went over to see if they had left behind a note or anything that would explain their sudden departure. Walking around the house revealed nothing, except a few abandoned toys and claw marks where their dog had scratched up the back door. Wandering back to my porch, I stopped and looked around, but this time I looked past the neighbors' backyards and into the yards of the people behind them. Roughly a quarter of them had boarded up windows. After that, I started buying supplies.

The last month has been the worst, with the disappearances happening more frequently. I stopped going to work entirely, focusing on stocking up on food, lumber, and tools. I even snuck a couple of shotguns into the house, wary of the neighbors' response, but I shouldn't have bothered. There's only a handful of neighbors left around me now, and all of them seem to be oblivious to what's going on. I tried talking to them, explaining the odds against this many families simply moving out in the middle of the night, but they simply blow me off. Before they stopped talking to me altogether I did find out something interesting though: all of the families who initially disappeared owned dogs. Some of them owned large ones, like a mastiff, but most of them had medium to yappy sized dogs. Most of the dogs were incapable of defending a house, but all of them were capable of warning their owners against any intruders. Perhaps that's why they were chosen first – I can't think of any other reason or common denominator. As for the remaining neighbors, I gave up trying to help them and started to use what time I had left bolstering my defenses.

Currently, my house is one of the five in the neighborhood still left inhabited. During the day I drive around, getting more supplies from the now abandoned stores and looking for anyone else doing the same. At night I watch from the second story of my house, trying to find the reason or cause behind the vanishing families, but the only thing I've seen are more and more lights going out. All I have left to do now is make sure the doors are locked, my guns are loaded, and my tripwires are in place each night. And then I wait.