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Abstract

Once upon a time there was a Housing Inspector who received a call from the police. More precisely, there was a young man, newly appointed by the mayor to serve as Housing Inspector, who received a call from the police.

Keywords

Fiction; There Was An Old Woman; Greg Jenkins

9

THERE WAS AN OLD WOMAN

By Greg Jenkins

Once upon a time there was a Housing Inspector who received a call from the police. More precisely, there was a young man, newly appointed by the mayor to serve as Housing Inspector, who received a call from the police. This was his first day on the job.

His name was Solomon Grundy--an unfortunate circumstance which was compounded by the fact that he hailed from the town of Grundy, Virginia. Grundy from Grundy, his co-workers would murmur sadly, and shake their heads in weary disbelief.

Grundy was a tall, thin, pallid fellow with a quick nervous smile and large spidery hands which danced around him in constant motion. He was a hard-working, God-fearing, self-effacing kid straight out of college who tended to make everyone around him as uncomfortable as he was. He had a pleasant face and a friendly manner, both of which caused people to suspect he was up to no good.

Chief among his detractors was the very same mayor who'd named Grundy Housing Inspector. The mayor was a gruff, cynical man who saw in Grundy a condensation of all the forces in life he couldn't stand. Nevertheless, he'd not only hired Grundy, he'd hired him with a certain gusto. This he'd done for two reasons. First, the mayor felt a psychological need to have someone like Grundy around to give the mayor something to grumble about when everything else was going reasonably well. Second, in a city whose population was nearly a hundred thousand, Grundy had been the only person naive enough to've applied for the job.

The mayor made his decision following a turbulent interview which left both men profoundly agitated. The session had begun with a five minute staring contest in which Grundy rocked to and fro in his cushioned chair, alternately smiling hopefully and wincing forlornly, while the mayor bored right into him, staring him down coldly, harshly, disdainfully.

When the notion to speak finally occurred to him, the mayor said, "Housing Inspector, huh?"

"Yes, sir," Grundy replied, with a trace of relief.

The mayor cracked his knuckles in one violent movement, then tapped the ashes from his cigar directly onto his carpeted floor.

"Why?"

"Well," said Grundy, "I'd like to make our community a better place in which to live."

This statement provoked the mayor to leap from his chair in a paroxysm of rage, flinging his cigar clear across the room and out into the hall.

"You wanna what?" the mayor shouted. "You wanna make the community a better place in which to live! ? Are you running for Miss America or what? Get with it, Grundy. You think life is some kind of a fairy tale? Some kind of a nursery rhyme, for Pete's sake?"

Grundy just sat there in alarm, his eyes wide, his hands dancing.

"Lemme tell you something, Buster," the mayor went on, calming himself as a secretary brought his cigar back into the room and handed it to him, "I'm gonna hire you--you've got the job--but don't you ever, ever, say anything like that to me again. Savvy?"

Grundy savvied all right, though he couldn't quite shake the feeling he'd just been fired, rather than hired.

The interview had taken place a week ago, and this morning, a gray drizzly Monday morning, he reported to work feeling a bit uneasy still. Actually, he felt better than he'd thought he might. He kept telling himself there was no way the job itself could be as bad as the interview he'd gone through in to get the job. This attitude of tempered optimism lasted only until he located his office and met his secretary.

His office was buried down in the basement of City Hall, next to the furnace room. It was a tiny cubicle, not much bigger than a typical closet, and no better lit--the lights wouldn't come on. Peering into the darkness, he made out what might've been an antique desk, a lopsided chair, a rickety bookshelf. There appeared to be a series of pipes--large ones--crisscrossing his ceiling and a tangle of wires twisting across his otherwise naked floor. Cobwebs tickled his nose.

His mood plummeting, he tried to look on the bright side, which, without lights, was no easy trick. As Housing Inspector, he reminded himself, he'd be spending a lot more time in other people's houses than in his office. Besides, maybe this wasn't his office after all. Perhaps some mistake has been made. Perhaps, like the slightly more debonair Rick of Casablanca, he'd been misinformed. He decided to check with his secretary.

He found her, a Miss Lucy Locket by name, down the hall in her own (infinitely more presentable) office. The room she occupied, he noted, was at least four times the size of the one he'd just explored. On the other hand, this might not be unreasonable considering that Miss Locket carried at least four times the bulk of Grundy. A great rosy girl of a woman, she possessed the prim bearing and insuperable dignity of a lady who'd worked for the city since it was founded and who was scheduled to retire, with suitable fanfare, in another six weeks. From behind her desk, holding her telephone receiver out in front of her like some bizarre amulet, she regarded her visitor cautiously.

"Miss Locket, I take it," Grundy said, offering his hand.

"You take it correctly," she answered, not too warmly. Her eyes never strayed from his. "And you must be . . ." She hesitated. "Grundy from Grundy," she said at last.

"You can call me Solomon."

"Yes, I'm sure I can," she said in the same not-too-gushy tone.

"Miss Locket, I have a question. In fact I have a number of questions."

Saying nothing, she continued to watch him carefully.

"Miss Locket," he pressed ahead, "could I . . . Let me ask you this. Why are you holding your phone out like that?"

"Because it's for you."

"For me? I have a call?"

"Yes."

"Ha! My first call." He rubbed his splendid hands together; suddenly he felt much better.

"Who is it?"

"It's the police," she said, continuing to watch his every move.

Grundy's face, the color of milk to begin with, seemed to turn even whiter.

"The police?" he said quietly.

Whereupon Miss Locket gave him a single sharp bob of her majestic head.

Grundy took the phone, swallowed and said, "Hello?"

"Sergeant Spratt," the curt voice on the other end informed him. "I'm trying to reach the Housing Inspector. Are you the Housing Inspector?"

"Well, I am now."

"Now's the time I'm talking about," Spratt said. "I think maybe you and I oughta get together--say this morning?"

"Well, I--"

"Say five minutes?"

"Well--"

Spratt hung up with a loud whack leaving Grundy to say to himself, or to the increasingly indignant and flabbergasted Miss Locket, "Is there anything . . . terribly wrong?"

Grundy instantly forgot all the other questions he'd meant to ask so that he might concentrate on that one, the new one, the awful one. Was there anything terribly wrong? Everyone else in the building, tipped off by Miss Locket, began to wonder the same thing and by the time Spratt showed up five minutes later a fine crowd had gathered to see Grundy off. They all hung around the top of the broad marble steps leading down to the street where Spratt waited in his shiny blue cruiser, light spinning, wipers slapping against the gray thickening rain. Secretaries, councilmen, engineers, planners, even the mayor--especially the mayor--all stood and watched, dumbfounded, as young Grundy went jittering down the steps, climbed into the car, and vanished up the street. For a long while they stared at the rain, silently.

Not nearly as pensive, Grundy cut right to the core of the matter.

"Am I in some sort of trouble?" he said, brushing the rain from his jacket.

Spratt, a middle-aged man with a face utterly void of emotion glanced over at Grundy.

"I dunno," he said. "Are you?"

"What I mean is, am I under arrest?"

"Not that I know of." Another glance. "Should you be?"

A fat quivering raindrop held fast to the tip of Grundy's nose where it had made friends with the wisp of a cobweb. Grundy pulled at his nose repeatedly.

"I guess what I'm asking is where we are going. And why."

"You are the Housing Inspector, aren't you?"

"I am now."

"Now's the time I'm talking about," Spratt confirmed, "I thought you might like to inspect a house."

And Spratt began to tell him about the notorious St. Ives section which Grundy had never heard of.

"Man," said Spratt, "they got some houses out there you wouldn't believe."

"St. Ives . . . is it a slum?"

"Slum! You kidding? It's a very fancy neighborhood, but weird. Strange. Place is fulla 'bo's."

"Bo's?" Grundy was thinking. Bow ties? Bo Derek's? Bows and arrows?

"Bohemians," Spratt said. "Artists. Eccentrics. And they got some digs out there that are about as legal as murder--in my opinion."

"Sounds interesting."

"Interesting! Interesting isn't the word for it, pal. That place has got more lunatics per square foot than Congress. Give you an example. Last week we picked up two juveniles--boy and a girl--that'd snuffed some old broad by shoving her into her own oven and baking her."

"Oh my God."

"We got 'em over at Banbury Cross now for a psychiatric evaluation. Another example. About a month ago some guy jumped into a hedge of hawthorn, don't ask me why, and managed to scratch out both his eyes. You should've seen him, blood running down his face horrible. When we showed up he was still there jumping into other hedges carrying on about trying to scratch his eyes back in again."

Spratt shook his head, "Initially we thought he was on PCP, but the lab tests came back negative."

Spratt kept on, telling next a tale about a horticultural genius named Peter something-or-other who, suspecting his wife of infidelity, imprisoned her within a hollowed-out pumpkin the size of a Volkswagen, but Grundy had ceased to listen. Hands twitching, Adam's apple bouncing up and down like a miniature basketball, he has taken to staring out the window at what was now an ugly storm. The rain slashed at them in gusts, jolting the car and making Grundy feel weak and vulnerable.

"You don't suppose there'll be any trouble out there today, do you?" he said suddenly.

Spratt broke off his recitation and looked over once more at the pale, skinny kid next to him. He softened his voice a little.

"Nothing we can't handle," he said.

"When will we be there?"

"Pretty soon," Spratt reckoned squinting out at some esoteric landmark. "As a matter of fact, we're there now."

No sooner had Spratt said this than a miraculous change occurred in the weather. A final puff of wind shook the car as they seemed to pass through some sort of invisible membrane. And then they were bathed in sunshine.

The storm was behind them, replaced by pink puffy little clouds and a fabulous blue sky. Off to one side a rainbow arched magnificently into the flank of a lush green hill where it actually seemed to

make contact, glistening a soft yellow at the foot. Bluebirds swooped in the sky, singing cheerfully.

Grundy was overwhelmed at the difference.

"What...", he stammered, "How ... Would you look!"

The taciturn Spratt didn't seem to've noticed.

Even the landscape had changed dramatically as Spratt had suggested it would. Huge green trees lined the street in abundance and flowers bloomed in electrifying color: scarlet phlox, purple and white lilacs, orange daylilies, feathery blue daisies. The houses were different, too, at least along this street. Small, brightly painted cottages with white picket fences were common.

Grundy gawked out the window trying to make a suitable exclamation. Before he could, they turned a corner and Spratt gestured casually.

"Up there's our house," he said. "You're the expert. I'll let you be the judge."

Now amazement sat on Grundy like an elephant.

He blinked in awe at the apparition which rose before them in the distance. It was a house all right, but a house unlike anything Grundy had ever seen before. Intricately wrought, correct to the last detail, the thing was astounding.

It was shaped like a giant, high-topped shoe.

Grundy beside him, Spratt knocked on the door. A moment later it was answered by a rather plump old woman in a frayed calico housedress and white apron.

"Yes, boys?" she beamed at them. "Can I help you?"

In what may've been a redundancy since Spratt was wearing his uniform, he tapped the badge on his chest and said, "My name's Spratt. I'm a cop."

"Oh my," the old woman said and turned to Grundy. Not to be outdone, Grundy took a short step forward, pulled out his driver's license, and announced:

"My name's Grundy. I'm a ... I'm a Housing Inspector."

"You're Kitty Fisher?" Spratt demanded of her in his flat, no-nonsense voice.

"Yes."

"We'd like to ask you a few questions, Mrs. Fisher, if you don't mind. May we come in?"

"Oh, please, please do," she smiled, spreading her arms beneficently. "Come right in. Can I get you some coffee?"

"Thanks; that won't be necessary," Spratt said as they went in.

"I hope you'll excuse the way everything looks," she said, "but I wasn't expecting company."

This wasn't false modesty on her part. The place really was a mess. They were in the livingroom which was strewn with diapers, baby bottles, a blanket or two, dolls, balls, the scattered pieces of many jigsaw puzzles, sections of newspaper, a pogo stick, and the odd lump of rotting fruit. There were also as many half-dressed children roaming about--some crawling, some biped--as any household could bear. A few cats and dogs ran around yawning with the

children and everything smelled like a dirty sock. Or like a dirty shoe.

"I believe Mr. Grundy would like to begin," Spratt proposed.

This came as news to Grundy, but he was up to it.

"Mrs. Fisher," he said, "this is a very unusual house."

"Oh, it isn't much, really, but we call it home."

Grundy explained to her that the city, like most communities across the country, adhered to a standard housing code. In this case it was the one originally developed by the Building Officials and Code Administrators International, commonly known as the Basic Code.

"It's nothing to be overly concerned about," he assured her. "The Code simply provides that all houses built inside the corporate limits must comply with an agreed-upon set of standards designed to guarantee an acceptable level of safety for the occupants as well as for those living nearby."

Mrs. Fisher looked at Grundy as though he'd just spoken in tongues.

"Ah," she said.

"Do you mind, ma'am, if I just sort of take a look around?"

"Oh, please," she said. "Whatever you like. My house is yours. Anything I can do to help our city ..."

So while Spratt eased himself backward onto a battered taupe couch (onto a wet sticky red lollipop wide as the palm of your hand), Grundy went off for a look-see. Stepping carefully around the ubiquitous children and pets, he examined the house from top to bottom--or from ankle to sole. He hadn't thought to bring his checklist with him, not knowing the nature of the trip, but felt he was doing an altogether professional job anyway. Mainly he was looking for potential problems with the wiring, the plumbing, the heating, and the materials from which the house was constructed.

Finishing up, he happened to gaze out a bedroom window. Beneath him were the massive brown shoe-strings elegantly tied into an enormous bow. He wondered if they might not be highly flammable. He decided to go down and out into the yard where he could see them more clearly.

Outside, he discovered he was no closer to the Brobdingnagian laces than before. He was debating whether or not to borrow a ladder and climb up on the "roof" when his eye wandered down the street. He noticed there were some other houses which would no doubt require his attention. About half a block to the south were two little bungalows: one apparently made of straw and the other of sticks. Unbelievable, he thought. And off on a hillside was a big black castle complete with parapets and a moat. It would take him at least a week to get through that thing.

His concentration on his work fell apart momentarily when a luscious, green-eyed blonde came swiveling down the sidewalk right in front of him. She was wearing a snug red workout suit with a chic red hood. He was about to say hi to her when he realized she was being followed by a young man. He was dressed all in black and sporting a flamboyant Afro, and was

trying with little success to get the lady's attention.

"Hey, sweet momma," the man called to her, "where you goin' so foxed up? Hey, baby, c'mere for a second."

The girl kept swiveling along pointedly ignoring him.

The sun was higher now and the day was beginning to grow warm. Grundy felt a little dizzy. Suddenly he heard voices, the singing voices of youngsters at play. They were floating to him from behind a wall of cobalt blue hydrangeas. The boys and girls were completely hidden from his view, yet their pretty voices enchanted him, even more so when he understood their song:

Solomon Grundy,
Born on a Monday,
Christened on Tuesday,
Married on Wednesday,
Took ill on Thursday,
Worse on Friday,
Died on Saturday,
Buried on Sunday:
That is the end
Of Solomon Grundy....

It was a rhyme he'd first heard many years before when he was a child. He saw nothing ominous in the words despite their gloomy message. It was only a song--he kind of liked it. For a moment he chanted along with the tiny, disembodied voices. He felt a brief desire to go back behind the wall of blue and meet the young singers to play with them. But this particular Solomon Grundy was a Housing Inspector with work to do. The moment, like a soap bubble, twinkled and then disappeared forever.

Removing his jacket, he went back inside the shoe-house.

The scene in the livingroom hadn't changed a whit. Spratt sat; the old woman stood; and all the lesser creature swarmed among them like so many elves and fairies.

When Grundy stepped back into the room, the old woman's face lit up with a mixture of hope and dread. Grundy tried to put her at ease.

"Not too bad," he said flashing his losing smile. "Pretty good, overall. Couple of minor problems."

"Oh?" Mrs. Fisher said. "What are they?"

"Well, asbestos for one thing. I found some traces of what appears to be asbestos down in the basement. Now, if this house was done with asbestos, you oughta take steps to have it removed. Might involve tearing your walls and ceilings apart, I guess, but asbestos is a known carcinogen. Might give you and your kids cancer, see?"

She touched her lip with her plump little fingers.

"Goodness," she whispered.

"Another thing would be your sanitary facilities. You're using a septic tank. There's a city ordinance which says that all residences are required to hook up to the city's sewer system. Of course, that's going to involve tearing up your yard and doing some

construction work--but don't worry about it. The city has programs to help with the financing, which, uh... might be considerable."

"Financing," she echoed softly, her eyes clouding over.

"Other than that, you're A-OK," said Grundy ducking as a purple jelly bean flew past his ear.

Just then Spratt stood up with, amazingly, an expression on his face. He looked inquisitive.

"Wait a minute," he said. "What about the fact that this place is built like a shoe? Isn't there some sort of a regulation against that?"

Grundy scratched his head.

"I'm not sure," he confessed. "I haven't gotten that far in the manual yet. I really don't know."

"Seems to me there oughta be some sort of a regulation," Spratt insisted.

"I'll have to check," said Grundy and politely shook Mrs. Fisher's moist hand.

"Hold on," Spratt ordered. "We're not quite finished yet."

Brandishing a clipboard and a black, felt-tipped pen, he swaggered over, red lollipop stuck to the seat of his pants and stood between them. He was facing the old woman.

"Mrs. Fisher," he said, "I can't help but notice you've got a fair number of kids here."

One of them scurried between his legs.

"God has been kind to me, Sergeant."

"How many do you have, exactly?"

"Dozens," she tried to smile. "Dozens. And I would gladly welcome a dozen more."

"They all seem to be roughly the same age: from two up to about seven or eight, I'd say."

"Yes..."

"Mrs. Fisher, how is that possible? Do you have 'em by the litter or what?"

"Why, no, Sergeant, I--"

"Because if you'll pardon my saying so, ma'am, your're pretty old to be having even one child, much less all this."

She drew herself up to her full height of five-two and a half.

"Many of my little ones are adopted," she said.

"Many?" He jotted something down. "How many is 'many,' Mrs. Fisher?"

"I don't recall."

"Would your husband recall?"

"My husband is--" She stopped.

"Yes?"

She patted her apron nervously. "My husband is deceased."

"So he is. I've got it here in my notes."

Spratt scribble down something else. Grundy hovered nearby listening attentively.

"He died... when was it? Two years ago?"

"Something like that."

"Under what would have to be termed 'mysterious circumstances,' wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Spratt flipped through a few pages.

"According to the police report your husband died

of injuries incurred when a goose threw him down a flight of stairs. Now let's be honest with each other, Mrs. Fisher. Having a goose throw a man down a flight of stairs to his death is not exactly an everyday occurrence, is it? Even in St. Ives?"

"I would rather not discuss it, Sergeant," she said quickly. Her hands were trembling. Her face was tinged here and there with small red blotches.

"Was there an insurance settlement, ma'am?"

"I--beg--your--pardon!"

"I don't suppose you'd care to disclose the amount."

She began waving her hand overhead in the manner of a boxing referee signalling a TKO.

"That's it," she said, "that's all. Gentlemen. Sergeant, I am sorry, but I'm afraid you'll ..."

"If I might ..."

"You'll have to leave right now, Sergeant. I mean it. I'm sorry."

Not one for confrontations, Grundy went straight to the door. Spratt lingered, rearranging the materials in his clipboard.

"If I might just show you something, Mrs. Fisher. Some photos. Then we'll be on our way."

The old woman sighed, her breath harsh with rale.

"All right," she said. "All right."

"These are pictures of children," Spratt said producing a manilla envelope and extracting a handfull of eight-by-ten black-and-white glossies.

"I want you to tell me if you recognize them."

Slowly, with a touch of ritual, he began to go through his stack holding up one photo and then another, returning them to his stack with measured precision.

The old woman's mouth fell open.

"Do you recognize them, Mrs. Fisher? You really should. There's little Matthew and Simon and Tricia."

Grundy came back over to get a look for himself. Like Mrs. Fisher, he recognized them; they were many of the same kids he'd seen around the house. A couple were in the livingroom even now. In these shots each was naked, standing abjectly beside the kneeling, stern-faced Sergeant Spratt. Their slender backs, shoulders and buttocks were covered with ugly bruises and abrasions.

"You must've tied into the little shavers pretty good to produce marks like that," Spratt said. "I also understand you don't believe in overfeeding them. I find that ironic in a person who doesn't look like she's missed too many meals herself."

Thoroughly flustered, Mrs. Fisher could barely bring herself to say, "Sergeant, these pictures, they're really not as bad as they seem. I have so many children ... sometimes they can be difficult to handle. Surely you've heard of discipline?"

"Yes ma'am." Deliberate pause. "I've also heard of child abuse. Mrs. Fisher, you're under arrest. You have the right to remain silent."

Spratt read her her rights from the clipboard and handcuffed her. Grundy and the old woman were equally stunned. The yowling kids were unaware that anything was amiss.

"I'm gonna take her downtown," Spratt told Grundy.

"How about doing me a favor? Stay here and keep an eye on things. I'll send somebody by to relieve you as soon as I can."

Not waiting for a reply, Spratt guided the bawling, staggering old woman away. Grundy trailed them to the door like a pale shadow and watched them leave. Behind and all around him the kids laughed, cried, hollered, ran and generally paralleled the chaos in Grundy's churning mind. He wondered how long he would have to wait, wondered if he'd be forced to hitchhike back to work, wondered what the mayor might say to him when he finally got back. He wondered, too, at the despicable acts committed by Mrs. Kitty Fisher, now on her way to the clink.

Overhead, unseen by Grundy, a hag on a broom buzzed the house.

