

# A FAMILY MATTER

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BARB GOFFMAN

Things seemed to be shaping up so nicely that cool spring morning—then Doris heard the squawking.

Chickens? She nearly choked on her coffee.

She shifted closer to her living room window, peering through her cat-eye glasses around the heavy drapes. A big, yellow moving van had arrived at the empty house next door ten minutes before, followed by a sedan. A young couple had emerged from it, him with a square jaw and sandy hair, her with a stylish platinum bob and wearing pedal pushers, just like Mary Tyler Moore on that new television program *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Three kids had piled out from the back, two boys and a girl, ranging from ages six to ten, Doris guessed. They looked happy and well dressed. After the tragedy that happened to the last family that lived in that house, it was nice to see a good family moving into it. The new children could play with Doris's son and daughter. The new wife could fill the empty spot in her bridge game.

Well, that's what Doris had thought until she heard the noises coming from the van. But no. It couldn't be chickens. She had to be mistaken. This was The Glen, a good suburban community—the epitome of what every mother wanted in 1962. Tract housing with aluminum siding. Each home built in the last five years, all on quarter-acre lots. Everyone had two new cars. Almost every husband worked at the pharmaceutical company downtown. And every lawn was well maintained. They all were moving up the ladder of success. Together. So there was no way the nice family moving in next door could have—

“Chickens?” Doris's neighbor Ruth exclaimed as she hurried into the living room, tendrils from her blonde bouffant sliding against her powdered cheeks. She wore a lovely cornflower-blue, belted shirtwaist dress that complemented her eyes.

“Definitely chickens,” their neighbor Audrey said, entering the room on Ruth's heels. She looked extremely trim in her black capris paired with a crisp pink blouse and matching scarf wound through her shoulder-length brown hair.

Ruth and Audrey had let themselves in, as always. Audrey lived right across the street from the new neighbors, and Ruth lived directly on the

other side of them. The three women had coffee at Doris's every morning after they sent their children off to school and their husbands off to work.

"Did you hear them, Doris?" Ruth asked.

Disturbed, Doris nodded. "I did."

And now she saw them. The two boys were carrying coops with cackling hens toward the back of the house, through the narrow side yard between their house and Doris's. The birds were flapping their wings, making a ruckus. Her children would be delighted when they returned from school. But Doris was not delighted. Not at all.

"We have to do something," Ruth said.

"But we should be nice about it," Audrey added.

Doris widened her eyes. "We're always nice. It's nice to give advice on how to fit in. How else will they learn?"

"We should go talk to them now," Ruth said. "Maybe they could get the moving men to take the chickens away. To a farm or something."

"That is an excellent idea," Doris said, setting down her cup. "C'mon."

The trio headed next door, passing the neighbors' children playing tag on the lawn. They hadn't reached the walkway before the oldest boy called out, "Mom. Company."

Doris suddenly felt embarrassed by not having a welcome pie with her. She hated to arrive empty-handed. It looked bad.

The wife stepped outside just as the movers approached the front door, carrying a worn, dated sofa.

"Please set that in the living room against the far wall. And when you get to the aqua-blue furniture, it goes in the den, straight through the garage," she said to the men before turning to the trio and smiling. "Hi. I'm Ginny. Pleased to meet you."

The ladies introduced themselves, then spent a couple of minutes asking polite questions—where were the new neighbors from, where did her husband work. Turned out Ginny's husband, Bill, was about to start a new job at the pharmaceutical company, the same place Doris's and Audrey's husbands worked.

"It's such a nice place," Audrey said.

"Lots of room for advancement," Doris said.

"A lot of opportunities to make a difference too," Audrey said. "The work is important. And the people are so nice."

Doris struggled not to roll her eyes, wondering if Audrey knew any adjectives besides *nice*. "Yep. Plus you get two weeks vacation and a pension plan."

"And good life insurance," Ruth said. "The poor woman who used to live here learned that the hard way."

"Oh," Ginny said. "I had no idea."

"Her husband died in a car accident this past winter," Audrey said. "She decided after he passed to move with her children back home to her parents. Such a shame."

"That's terrible," Ginny said. "Well, hopefully we'll make better memories here. I know the children are going to love having such a big yard out back."

"About that," Ruth said as Ginny's husband stepped outside.

Ginny introduced them all. "Nice to meet you, ladies," Bill said. "And thank you for this warm welcome to the neighborhood." Bill put his muscular arm around Ginny's shoulder.

"Our husbands bowl on Tuesday nights," Audrey said. "Maybe you'd like to join them."

Bill flashed a big smile. "There's nothing better than relaxing at night with the boys."

He's charming, Doris thought. If he had the right drive, and with the right backing at home, he'd go far at the company. And that reminded her of why they were there.

"I'm sorry to bring this up," she said. "But we couldn't help notice that you have chickens."

Ginny nodded, her eyes darting briefly to her husband. "Between the five of us, we go through a lot of eggs."

"I'm sure you do," Doris said. "It's just that . . . frankly, we don't do that here. Chickens, I mean. Livestock. Poultry." She scrunched her nose in distaste.

"It's not that we don't love animals," Audrey said.

"But animals are meant for farms," Doris said. "And this is a good neighborhood. Not a *farm*," she said, a bit sternly perhaps, but she needed to make sure her point was clear.

Ginny bit her lip as her husband's face hardened for a second. And did he squeeze her shoulder? Ah, so he wasn't all charm. Doris had met men like him before. They don't like being told what to do. But if he was going to climb the ladder to management at work, his family needed to fit in, so he should accept good advice when it came his way.

"I see," Ginny said in a halting tone. "Maybe we could give the chickens to your mother, Bill. She should have room."

"Take care of it." He nodded curtly. "Well, we have a lot of work to do, so I'm going to head back in. Once again, good meeting you, ladies." And with a quick nod, he was gone.

Ginny forced a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Thank you for letting me know. It's been so great meeting you all. But as Bill said, I should return to unpacking. Lots to do." And she backed into the house, still smiling.

A few minutes later, the trio was sitting in Doris's kitchen, debriefing.

"She seems nice," Audrey said. "They both do."

Now Doris did roll her eyes while she lit a cigarette. As if being nice was what was important in this world.

"That's well and good," Ruth said. "But the key question is, will she fit in?"

Doris took a deep puff before blowing out a ring of smoke, thinking how one bad apple could spoil a whole bunch. "She better."

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Two afternoons later, as Doris was popping a roast into the oven, her telephone rang. She and Audrey had finished a game of cards a few minutes before and were discussing how Mrs. Campbell—Doris's son's teacher—had recently announced she was pregnant and would not be returning to teach the following fall. The woman was nearly forty years old. It was scandalous. Audrey, of course, thought it was nice.

"It's me," Ruth said on the phone. "You won't believe what's going on in Ginny's backyard."

Trees had been planted so that, eventually, you wouldn't be able to see into any neighbor's backyard from your own in The Glen, but the community was still young, and so were the trees.

"Not more animals?" Doris said, setting down her pot holders. The chickens had already disappeared.

"No," Ruth said. "Go look."

Doris stretched her telephone cord over to the window, peering past the small side yard into the neighbors' backyard. "Oh, hell no." Ginny had strung up a clothesline. She had undergarments blowing in the breeze under the cloudy sky. "I'm going to put a stop to this."

Doris hung up and pointed a thumb toward the window. "Can you believe this?"

"A lot of people use clotheslines," Audrey said.

"Not here they don't. Not in The Glen."

Audrey shrugged.

"I'm going over there," Doris said. "You coming?"

"No. I have vacuuming to do at home."

The both stepped out of Doris's back door. Right before parting ways, Audrey said, "Be nice."

Nice my ass, Doris thought. Being nice clearly wasn't getting the message across that this was an upscale neighborhood. She wasn't going to let this new family bring everyone down with their low-rent ways.

"Hello," she called as she slipped into Ginny's yard.

Ginny turned and took a few steps back. She was wearing jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and big sunglasses. She half smiled, looking uncomfortable. Probably realizes she's been caught in the act, Doris thought.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your chores," Doris said as she crossed the grass. She could practically hear Audrey nagging her to be pleasant. "I couldn't help seeing"—she gestured at Ginny's wash—"your laundry. I wouldn't want you to feel out of place. It's so important to make the right impression. So, you should know, we just don't do that here."

Ginny tilted her head, as if trying to parse a foreign language. "You don't do laundry?"

Doris laughed. "No. Of course we do laundry, but we don't dry it outside where everyone can see your . . . unmentionables. You need to get a dryer, honey. Inside the house." There, I was nice, Doris thought.

"Oh. I didn't realize," Ginny said, her cheeks flushing.

"Don't worry. I'm happy to help you along. Now you go shopping for that dryer. And maybe tomorrow afternoon you can come over for a screwdriver and get to know the girls better."

"That sounds nice." Ginny bit her lip.

Nice again, Doris thought. She and Audrey would get along like a house on fire.

"Unfortunately, I'm allergic to alcohol," Ginny continued.

Wow. Doris didn't know how she'd get through the week if she were allergic to alcohol. This woman was not going to fit in.

"Well, maybe we can play cards or something," Doris said. "I'll call on you soon. Bye now."

The good thing about the word *soon*, Doris thought as she entered her house, is that it could mean anything. Tomorrow. Or never.

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After breakfast on Saturday morning, Doris sent her children outside to play while she finished up her coffee and cigarette. Her husband, Martin, had already left for an early golf game. They'd had rain the prior day, so Doris was glad for the warmth and sunshine. She pushed up the kitchen window, and for a few moments she enjoyed breathing in the lovely spring air—until she was assaulted by the sound of a lawn mower starting up. One very nearby.

Her mouth fell open. Mowing on a Saturday?

That shouldn't happen. Not in The Glen. She looked into her side yard and the neighbors' backyard. Nothing. Then she hurried to her living room and stared out her picture window. One of Ginny's sons was mowing their front lawn.

That backward family!

Doris stubbed out her cigarette and marched over to the neighbors' house. Over the drone of the mower, she rang their bell.

Ginny opened the door wearing sunglasses, heavy makeup, and a smile on her face, though the smile quickly faded. "Good morning, Doris. What can I do for you?" She sounded wary.

"Good morning, Ginny. I'm afraid I have to tell you that while I appreciate that you're keeping your lawn tidy, we just don't do that here in The Glen—have our children do yardwork, I mean." She shook her head; the very thought nearly made her cringe. "That's what gardeners are for. My man is very good. He and his men come every Monday afternoon. They mow and trim the hedges and keep everything looking just right. You can find him in the book. Williams Lawn Service."

"Oh. I see. No one mows their own lawn here? No one?"

"No." Doris sighed. "I can see this is an adjustment for you. You've moved up in the world, living here. Moving up includes certain responsibilities, including doing things the right way. Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it."

"And you'll be around to help me," Ginny said in a low voice.

"Of course. We all help each other here. You know it's important for us

wives to make our husbands shine, including presenting the right image at home.”

Ginny smiled tightly. “Williams Lawn Service. Thank you for the tip, Doris. I’ll call them right away.” She stepped outside. “I better go tell my son Paul to stop mowing.”

“I think my kids are playing with Ruth’s in their backyard. I’m sure your children would be welcome there.”

Ginny nodded. “Thanks.”

As Doris and Ginny stepped down the walkway, the sun sprang from behind a cloud, warming Doris’s face and making her squint. She wished she’d worn her sunglasses, like Ginny had. “See you later.”

“See you,” Ginny said, stepping between her bushes and waving toward her son.

It wasn’t until Doris shut her front door that she wondered why Ginny had been wearing her sunglasses—inside the house.

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Doris spent the afternoon cleaning her kitchen. She mopped the floor, scrubbed the oven, and wiped down all the countertops. She even emptied out her refrigerator to make the inside sparkle. She did all this work with the windows open and her ears perked, listening for voices from Ginny’s house. When Doris’s children ran in for snacks, she fed them quickly and sent them back out to play with their friends. When Martin returned from golf, she gave him several chores to take care of in other parts of the house.

After she’d gotten home from Ginny’s that morning, Doris had lit a cigarette and recalled how Ginny had worn sunglasses the day she hung her laundry outside, even though it was cloudy. And she’d been wearing a long-sleeved shirt that overcast day—and today—even though it was warm enough for spring attire. Doris thought about the heavy makeup that Ginny always wore, much more than was stylish. Glasses, makeup, and long-sleeved shirts could cover up a lot, she realized.

So when she noticed that Ginny had opened all the windows in her house to let in the refreshing spring air, Doris did the same. She wanted the breeze. And she wanted to see what she could hear.

She so hoped she was wrong.

It was around four o’clock when she heard a car door slam and a screen door clang shut moments later. Doris put down her rag and stood by the window. Soon she heard voices carrying on the breeze, but she couldn’t make out what was being said. She guessed that was good. The yard between the two houses was narrow. If anyone was upset, surely she’d—

And that’s when she heard glass breaking.

Doris stood stock still, with her eyes closed and her back straight, pressing into the wall as she listened to Bill yell at Ginny about money. Money for a dryer. Money for food. Money for new shoes for the kids. And now money for a gardener. Did she think money grew on trees?

“I’m sorry,” Ginny cried repeatedly as he raged. And then, “Let me fix you another Moscow mule, Bill. It’ll calm you down.”

"You think a drink is going to solve our problems?"

The noise Doris heard next surely was the sound of Bill slapping Ginny's face. From Ginny's whimpers, Doris guessed he then moved on to using his fists. Doris couldn't see tears flowing down Ginny's cheeks, but she could feel them drenching her own.

"My God, Doris, what's wrong?"

Doris snapped her head toward her husband and ran to him. "Shhh." She covered his mouth with her hands as they stood in the entrance to their kitchen.

He grabbed her wrists and stared at her. "What's wrong?" he said softly.

The sound of Bill ranting followed by Ginny's cries, oofs, and sobs answered his question. "Is he . . . ?" Martin asked.

At Doris's nod, Martin's hazel eyes narrowed. He stormed toward the door.

"No," Doris whispered, clutching his arm. When Martin turned, bewildered, she said, "You'll save her today, but what about tomorrow, and the time after that? This isn't the first time, and it won't be the last."

Martin clutched his head. "So we'll call the police."

"They won't do anything. You know that. They'll say it's a family matter."

"What do you want me to do, Doris? I can't just stand here and let him beat her."

Doris nodded. "Another way. We need to find another way to help her." A way to save Ginny, not just for today but for always. Doris thought for a moment more, then said, "I have an idea."

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The following Saturday afternoon, Doris's house was filled with people. Nearly every family in the neighborhood had turned out for Ginny and Bill's welcome party. While the kids were running around in the backyard, the adults were smoking, eating hors d'oeuvres, and swirling cocktails. Bill was charming all the husbands with his jokes and stories. Ginny was making polite conversation with the wives. Doris had only seen her once during the week, when Doris stopped by briefly to invite Ginny's family to this party. Ginny had been wearing her sunglasses again. She'd sounded relieved when Doris didn't have any suggestions of things to do differently.

When Ginny and Bill arrived today, Doris noticed immediately that she had heavy makeup on, especially around her left eye and cheek. She moved stiffly and wore a long-sleeved sweater set, pants, and a scarf around her throat, even though all the other women wore sleeveless dresses. Doris blinked back tears thinking how badly Ginny must be hurt to need this much cover-up a week later.

Now, an hour into the party, Doris stood in the kitchen with Audrey and Ruth, where the table and counters were overflowing with welcome gifts, including a new percolator, mixer, and blender—things a wife might have gotten when she married if her friends or family could have afforded those gifts. So Bill wouldn't feel left out, someone had purchased a box

of cigars. And there was alcohol, a whole lot of it, including a special bottle of vodka. The gifts were a little more extravagant than with a usual welcome party. Doris had spread the word that it might be a good idea.

"I'm so glad you decided to throw this bash, Doris," Audrey said. "So nice of you."

Doris shrugged. "What can I say? I guess you're rubbing off on me."

"Nice shmice." Ruth flicked ash from her cigarette into a tray. "You've always said it, Doris. If one house looks bad, we all look bad. If this is what it takes to make them fit in, we do it."

"That's right," Doris said. "Whatever it takes." She turned toward Ginny, who now was surrounded by the tennis wives. It was all tennis all the time with them. "Ginny looks overwhelmed. I'm going to go save her."

"Thanks," Ginny said a few moments later as Doris steered her over toward the kitchen window. "And thank you again for throwing this lovely party for us."

Doris smiled. "My pleasure. More water? Are you sure I can't get you something more festive?"

"No, I never drink liquor. It makes me so ill."

Good, Doris thought. It always paid to double-check.

"But more water would be great," Ginny said. While Doris filled her glass, Ginny glanced outside. "I never realized how close our houses are."

Doris caught her eye. "They are quite close, aren't they? On a warm day, I might hear you sneeze."

Ginny's eyes widened.

"So how's Bill enjoying the new job?"

"He's liking it a lot, I think. He's in sales. He's always been so good with people."

That must be how he got you to marry him, Doris thought. But she said, "Martin loves working there too. Except he's in the lab. He's like a little kid with all those formulas and chemicals, always trying to come up with new medicines. I'm so proud of him."

"It must be wonderful to help people."

"I think so."

Of course there were many ways to help people. It had been easy for Martin to bring home a bottle of ethylene glycol—the main ingredient in antifreeze—this week and substitute it for half the vodka in the bottle now on the table. It had no smell, and the sweet taste could easily be masked in the right mixed drink. A third of a cup should be deadly, he'd said.

"Looks like you've got a lot of fantastic gifts," Doris said. "I think Audrey bought you crystal glasses. I mentioned that some of yours might have gotten broken . . . during the move."

Ginny's mouth popped open like the letter o.

"And someone left that large bottle of vodka. I bet it would be great to make Bill a big Moscow mule after dinner tonight. Or two. Just in case he happens to like that drink."

Now Ginny widened her eyes even further.

“Bill’s downing quite a bit now,” Doris continued. “After a long day drinking, a man might not feel well at night, especially with a couple of special Moscow mules on top of everything else. He might get a bad headache or feel sick. But I wouldn’t take him to the doctor. Just let him suffer through. Sleep it off. In a few hours, I’m sure it will all be over.”

Ginny visibly gulped. “Ruth mentioned the other day that the company offers good life insurance.”

“That’s right. Enough to take care of you and your kids if, God forbid, something were to happen to Bill. You’d be able to stay in your house and live happily ever after. And you wouldn’t need to wear a scarf around your neck anymore—not unless you wanted to.”

A tear escaped Ginny’s eye. She wiped it away. “Why are you helping me?”

Doris smiled tightly, her own eyes watering, as she thought with shame how it had taken Ginny’s plight to make her realize there’s more to life than projecting the right image.

“I stood in this exact spot a week ago, and I didn’t like what I heard.” She grasped Ginny’s hand. “This is The Glen. We don’t do that here.”