

## 135 Helm Street

The remnants of 135 Helm Street are covered with snow. Only the mailbox remains. The fire demolished the house and nearly all its contents in August. The fire marshal ruled the fire an act of arson. According to the report, the fire had started on the back deck, near the grill with the propane tank. I read the report in September, after the case had been tabled. I read the report again last month when the case was reopened.

“Where were you around one-thirty in the morning on August 23<sup>rd</sup>?”

Before the fire, the neighborhood was quiet. The neighbors had white picket fences, swing sets, and little dogs in the yard. The annual block party had occurred as planned in June. The Underwoods hosted the party in their backyard, as theirs was the largest and featured a pool. Balloons decorated the mailboxes and the tables were dressed in checkered cloths with candle centerpieces. Mr. Anderson lit the candles with his lighter on which the marine seal was engraved. After dessert was set out, the Underwoods announced the engagement of their eldest daughter to the boy she'd been dating since high school. The boy was a marine, which was enough to win Mr. Anderson's approval. Most of the neighbors, including the Underwoods, said the marriage wouldn't last. Mr. Anderson disagreed. Most marriages don't, so I placed money on that bet.

“Ms. Clark, I am directing you to answer the question.”

The month before the fire, the Anderson's dog dug a hole under the fence and ran loose up and down the street. The Anderson's youngest daughter chased the dog until he surrendered, collapsing in a panting heap in front of the fence he had so cleverly evaded. That afternoon, the Andersons learned to keep the dog on a leash.

“Ms. Clark, if you don’t answer the question, you will be held in contempt of court.”

The week before the fire, the Jamesons placed a realty sign in the upstairs bedroom window and another one in the front yard. Their house was listed well above market price, Mr. Anderson told me. The Jameson’s yard was tastefully landscaped, and they had remodeled their kitchen the year prior. Those improvements hardly excused the price inflation. Mrs. Underwood insisted that Mrs. Jameson had no intention of moving; she merely enjoyed the compliments of prospective buyers during the open houses.


“Ms. Clark, for the last time, where were you around one-thirty in the morning on August 23<sup>rd</sup>?”

The day before the fire, Mrs. Anderson waited at the bus stop for 15 minutes with her three small children and the dog on a leash. The school bus arrived at the corner at exactly 6:43am. Mrs. Anderson waved as the bus pulled away. Mrs. Jameson arrived at the bus stop at 6:55am with her two sons, only to be informed by Mrs. Anderson that she had missed the bus. Mrs. Jameson hurried her sons into the car. As she pulled away, I noticed one of the boys had left his shoe in the driveway.

“Ms. Clark—”

The evening before the fire, the moon was red. The Jamesons sat on their front porch drinking margaritas. The breeze carried their laughter into my bedroom window. The Underwoods had turned in early for the night. The Andersons’ mini van was missing from the driveway. I stayed up watching late-night talk show hosts interview celebrities I didn’t know.

“I was at home.”



The night of the fire, the sky glowed orange and the air was warm. The neighbors woke to the whistling and subsequent explosion of the propane tank. The fire had engulfed the back of the house before the Jameson's placed the first of many 9-1-1 calls. The smoke was thick and black, and the smell found its way into the carpets, curtains, and linens of the houses on the block. The ash settled on the windowsills.

"Ms. Clark, was anyone at home with you at the time?"

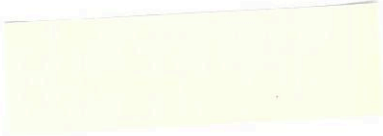
The day after the fire, the remnants of the Anderson's mini van were in the driveway. The local newspaper reported no casualties, but the Jamesons and the Underwoods insisted the Andersons were inside the house when it burned. The report indicated that no signs of human or animal remains were located in the debris.

"No, I live alone."

The week after the fire, the Andersons did not return home, and the authorities were unsuccessful in contacting them. I called in a favor with an old friend at the police department. He secured me a copy of the fire marshal's report. The report confirmed no remains were found. The only evidence collected was found a few yards away from the deck. Beneath some trees in a pile of leaves, a silver lighter with an engraved marine seal had been discovered.

"Ms. Clark, is it possible that you might have seen the arsonist from your living room window?"

A month after the fire, the Jamesons reduced the price on the house. Two months after the fire, the Jamesons received the first offer on their house. The day after the Jameson's posted "In Contract" across the realty sign in their yard, the Underwoods canceled their daughter's wedding. The following afternoon, I received a letter without a



return address. The letter read, "You win". A 10-dollar bill was enclosed. On the back of the letter was a marine watermark.

"No, it was dark."

"Ms. Clark, did Mr. Anderson ever mention his financial troubles?"

I shake my head.

"Please verbalize your answer for the court."

"No."