

## Morse Code Spy

There are nine houses along the lane in which the Kings and Waltons live. The Waltons live in the almost center of the line of homes; the Kings live in the second home from the start of the street on the left.

The other homes were occupied by children much older than Chip, Summer, Dale and April. They were seldom home and when they were home, they did not have time -- or chose not to spend time -- with the younger kids. Four of the families did not have any children living at home with them, preferring dogs, cats or other pets to round out their families instead.

It is mainly my fault, but I have not made a lot of friends among the neighbors up and down the street. Being away for years off and on and concentrating on Dolly and her family's needs allowed me little time to explore and just go knocking on doors introducing myself to the neighborhood.

The families along our street are for the most part liberal if not "middle of the road" politically. They have Asian, Hispanic and some African roots within their families. They, I have observed so far, been very tolerant of Dolly and my children, who have variations of orientations depending on the child and environment. It is one of those streets whereby everyone is aware of everyone else, but keeps their noses out of others' businesses.

Except for two families. The Morgenthals and their mangy dog Roger. Mrs. Morgenthal did not like the introduction of two highly energetic young boys into the neighborhood. "Little boys need to be controlled. They don't know how to be quiet, how to behave..." she was fond of saying to Dolly.

Dolly, always respectful to her, never paid the old woman any mind. Besides, it is much better to know where they are in the neighborhood than to fret and wonder about them getting into trouble in someone else's.

Across from the Kings is the home of the Belland-Rivera family. Swen Belland owned three tire stores in the South Lake community, all profitable because everyone needs tires for their cars, trucks and other vehicles. Six years ago, he purchased the house across from the Kings and moved in.

All of the women along the street -- including Mrs. Morgenthal -- thought he was one of the most handsome men in town. They would always ask if he's going to go to the annual Firemans' Dance downtown. Their thinking was beer and dancing. As far as I knew, everyone was pleased with their partners otherwise.

Then Swen up and found Esterina Rivera. Esterina, besides making the best Halloween cookies probably in the county, was a looker. Her slender body, coupled with the rich dark black hair of hers, and that accent -- a native from Belize -- she spoke perfect English with a strong accent -- was a winner. When one of the other neighbors had an issue with a repairman claiming that he only spoke Spanish and had to wait for his boss to come back to talk to him, Esterina was called

to help him understand that unless the shingles were installed by the end of the week, that he would be sued.

Esterina told the man in Spanish, "don't know what your game is, but these people are serious. Fix their roof today or you will spend time in prison tomorrow". The shingles were installed and the project completed by sundown.

She became their hero.

Esterina, already a friend of the kids, became a friend of many of the adults. She convinced her husband to go to the Firemans' Dance and their family contributed to the fund yearly. She became a busybody after someone (it was either Chip or Dale for sure) lit a large firecracker called an "M-80" in a hole and in the process killed a raccoon.

Hispanic families have a deep affection for all animals. She convinced her husband that Charles and Dale need to stay away from their yard. Forever. The boys were told this by Esterina.

"Forever?" Chip asked me. "How can someone prevent another person from being in their yard forever? They don't even last that long....sorry Dad...."

"If that was a dig, apology's accepted," I said, sitting at my desk looking at the computer screen and glancing a look at one of my sons. My giggling would happen later.

"Please Dad...go down the street and talk with them. We like being in their yard! They have this really cool tree to climb up on and we play "Morse Code Spy" up there...." Charles said.

"Okay." I turned my computer screen off and looked at my son, who was standing at the edge of my large desk.

"You got my attention. What's "Morse Code Spy"?"

"It's a game that Dale came up with. You know how to play "I Spy", right? Okay. I Spy goes like this....everyone else turns around or closes their eyes for a couple of seconds while the person spying finds something. Then he or she says "I spy something...ORANGE!" and we have to guess what it is...."

"Alright...so what's Morse Code Spy?"

"The Spy has to say "I Spy...."and then they have to use Morse Code to tell the clue. So you have to know Morse Code well...at least well enough to guess what the "spy thing" is...."

"And you two play this game in the trees?" I looked at my son, who does not resemble me at all.

"YES -- all FOUR of us play....one girl, one boy....we have to help April out with some of the words. She's only in the second grade you know...."

"So what does that have to do with the Belland-Riveras?" I asked.

"They won't let us in their yard any more and they have the best tree for playing the game with.... Dad, please -- go and talk with them and tell them that we need to play in their tree."

I looked at the pitiful face. It's not every day that I see that face other than happy because they blew up something, or discovered a new game or project which propelled them from the house for hours on end. I wonder where do they go to use the bathroom when they need to.... I shook my head.

"You won't do it?" Chip asked me, looking at me shaking my head.

"No, son...I was thinking of something else while you pleaded your case to me. Can I finish this post and then walk down to their house. I need to introduce myself to them anyway...."

"Great!! Can I go with you please?"

"No. If you or your brother did something wrong, I don't want to remind them of your faces for a while. Take "Morse Code Spy" out of your games list and invent a game indoors for a couple of days. I'll go and see if I can get you two back into their good graces." I said, turning my computer monitor back on.

"Thanks Dad. Oh...and Mom always brings snacks whenever she has to go to Mrs. Morgenthal's...kinda cheers her up!"

I smiled and said as Chip left my office room, "I think this is well beyond cookies and a thermos of coffee...."

I love the walk down to the street, and then walking up or down the street, especially in the evening. When we were younger, Elizabeth -- Dolly and I would walk down the driveway, holding hands and talking about how lucky we were to find and meet each other; and later to marry each other. Our immediate and future plans and ideas. There have been arguments -- few - - but we managed to work through our differences and difficulties and return back to the house holding hands and sometimes kissing the other's forehead, face or mouth.

Wonderful times always.

I passed by someone's car being driven down the street, the driver briefly waving to me before returning his hands to the steering wheel. I walked up the steps to the well-cared for yard, and the steps upward to the main door. I knocked on the storm door.

I stood for a few seconds before the inside door opened and the beautiful Esterina appeared. I was not expecting someone so pretty. I was not even expecting a woman.

"Hello. My name is Mike Walton and I live three doors down from you here on the street," I started. "May I talk with you about my family and your tree?"

"I am sorry Mr...."

"Walton", I stated.

"Mr. Walton. I do not speak English very well and do need to have my husband to, um, convert for me. Come back another time please."

Okay, lady. You've asked for me to turn on the Spanish translation switch in my brain, I thought.

In broken Spanish I responded, "I'm the father of the two hellions you kicked out of your yard; I am here to ask why because they love your tree and yard..."

She looked at me. She forgot about her "inability" to speak English. She had to test me, though.

"Did you get your Spanish from your parents, or the Cracker Jack box", she asked, forgetting that I too speak and understand the same language she spoke at me.

"Neither," I responded in her native language, "I learned by living among the people in San Salvador, in Chile, and in some other places I cannot share or I would have to choke you dead." I then smiled.

"I know you speak English -- probably better than I can write it." I added in Spanish.

She smiled back at me and said "Ah, the gig's up, huh copper?" she then laughed and opened her door wide and said "Come in. I was wondering which one of the fathers would be brave enough to admit being the parent of those two...." I grinned as she closed the door behind me.

"Please have a seat. I'm going to go get us some coffee and we will sit and you can tell me about your family. Where's your wife? Was she also scared?"

She removed herself to her kitchen area, leaving me to sit on the couch and look around the room. There were the Catholic homages to the Holy Family, the Mother Mary, and naturally, the Christ. Photos of scenery from her native land and Swen's -- I could not figure if he was from Sweden, Finland, Norway, or Estonia -- or Denmark -- were also plentiful as well as photos of her family, Swen's and their children. Little children, school children, adult children.

She returned with a pot of coffee, a small container of half and half, a small sugar bowl and two large coffee mugs.

"No, Elizabeth's a bus driver and today's she's on a charter. She's taking some kids from the Middle School summer program over to the big box Fitness Center." I waited until after she poured the coffee into the two coffee mugs before adding, "Thank you very much."

"No sugar or milk?" Esterina asked.

"No sugar, thank you; but I will take some milk." I helped myself to the pint container of milk and poured a little into one of the coffee mugs.

"So how did you end up with two Gringo children -- they are not twins, I know this."

"No. I think one of each is enough for this world. Adopted, like others of my children, " I answered.

"So you have others. Are they like your two -- adopted?"

"We didn't find my others in the same home, if that's what you're asking. One set of kids came naturally, with the first wife. Another set came adopted with the second wife, and the other child came separately but also adopted."

"So how many do you have in there up the street with your third wife?"

"Just the two -- Chip -- Charles and Dale."

Esterina took a sip of her coffee and then it hit her. She started laughing.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Walton...."

"Mike, please...." I took a sip of the coffee. Costa Rican blend, I bet.

"Esterina" she said before she continued to laugh. She finally stopped and apologized.

"No apology needed. It takes some people time to realize that the names are familiar. Good thing that kids today don't watch a lot of old time cartoons!" I smiled, taking another sip as I smiled at the beautiful woman sitting beside me.

"Chip and Dale. So no wonder that they are so curious and energetic, because they are like those two chipmunks in the cartoons!! Do they run around the house too?"

"No, but they sure keep the fire and police departments busy around here...." I said.

"Tell me. Why do everyone on this street stay to themselves? Is it because they don't like some of the people on the street or is it something else?"

"Well, to be honest, most of the people on the street love to be around each other...well...at least in my thinking. I've made some great friends among the people on this street, when I am here. The problem is that everyone is so busy nowadays, trying to make a living and hopefully making a good way for their children. I retired from the military but I keep myself busy downtown writing and assisting with marketing campaigns and websites. I still try to make time for all of my kids -- they are all out there making their ways in what they love doing -- and the two living with Dolly --Elizabeth -- and me."

I took another sip of coffee.

"When I came here to live with Swen, I thought it would be like living in a small village like the one I grew up in. Downtown is close to it but I don't get a lot of time to go there. While we have no children here, " Esterina took a sip from her coffee, "we do like the kids -- your kids and the girls across the street -- all playing together. There are other children here too... I see one girl with her boyfriend as they walk their dog up and down the block. And I know that there are three boys living at the end of the street and one girl there too....but I don't see them as much."

She took another sip of coffee.

"Do you suppose that we have a block party sometime so that everyone can meet everyone else?"

"I know that the Neilsons -- they are the ones living at the end of the street -- do a end of summer party and bonfire around the middle of August, before school starts up again. Before they moved, the Kellys -- that's the empty home at the top of the street when you turn in -- they used to do Christmas caroling a few years back but their voices all left for colleges and the Kellys divorced. Everyone lost interest in keeping it going after they left." I finished my mug of coffee.

"More?"

I shook my head sideways and responded, "no thanks. I really need to get back. We don't do a lot of entertaining -- our home is not ready for prime time right now -- but please let us know if you and Swen would love to go to the Brewery and have a beer or maybe over to Pioneer Place to get something to eat on the lake shore."

I then stood and looked at the eyes of the beautiful woman.

"I would apologize to you for whatever my boys did to get into your family's bad graces; but I ask you as their father to please forgive them this time and I will send them both over -- where's there's smoke, there's fire -- to apologize to you and your husband in person and to ask permission to play again in your yard and your tree. If they become a problem, please let Dolly or me know. They are really great boys with a lot of passion," I said as I moved myself to the door, "and sometimes they cannot fully control their passions. We're working on it, though."

As I opened the door, I added in Spanish, "And please don't tell folks that I speak Spanish as well as you speak English. It is supposed to be a secret, but I speak and understand several other languages also. It's part of what I did for a living for many decades."

"Your secret is safe with me, Mike." Esterina responded in her native language.

"The land in Costa Rico makes great coffee."

"Okay. No outside play for three days. Period. On the evening of the third day, you two are going to scrub and get dressed nicely and march down the street to the Belland-Riveras and you will apologize to them for whatever you two did."

Dale started "He..."

"I don't care who started it or who had the big idea or suggestion or what's the word I'm looking for..." I stopped and interjected.

"Premise. Hypotheses." Dale said.

"Yes. It doesn't matter who had the hypothesis. You BOTH need to apologize...and be nice. She and her husband likes you two. Ignore her when she starts laughing about your names, though...." I added.

"And Charles. Maybe you might want to consider bringing some cookies also", I smiled.