

At last he turned onto Driftwood Lane. It seemed uncommonly dark to him. It was *his* place – the lights were off! A shock of fear tensed his body. Ignoring the slippery road, he floored the accelerator and the car shot forward, careened down the block. He turned into his driveway and jammed to a halt behind Sharon’s car. Racing up the stairs, he thrust his key in the lock and pushed the front door open. “Sharon... Neil,” he called. “Sharon... Neil...”

Chilling silence offset the warmth of the foyer, made his hands clammy. “Sharon... Neil,” he called again.

He looked into the living room. Papers were scattered on the floor. Neil must have been doing cutouts; there were scissors and scraps on one open page. An untouched cup of cocoa and a glass of sherry were on the small end table near the fireplace. Hurrying over, Steve felt the cup. The cocoa was cold. He rushed into the kitchen, noticed the saucepan in the sink, then ran down the hall to the den. The sense of danger was overwhelming, stifling. The den was empty too. A fire was flickering in the hearth. [...] Not knowing what he was looking for, Steve raced from the den back to the foyer and noticed Sharon’s overnight bag and purse. He opened the door of the guest closet. Her cape was there! What would make her rush out without it? Neil! Neil must have had one of those violent attacks, the kind that come on so suddenly, that almost suffocated him.

Steve raced to the phone on the kitchen wall. The emergency numbers —hospital, police, fire, their own doctor— were clearly listed. He called the doctor’s office first. The nurse was still there. “No, Mr Peterson, we didn’t get a call about Neil. Is there anything...”

He hung up without explaining.

He called the emergency room at the hospital. “We have no record...”

Where were they? What had happened to them? His breath was coming in hard gasps. He looked at the wall clock. Nine-twenty. Nearly two hours since he’d tried to phone home. They’d been gone at least that long. The Perrys! Maybe they’d gone across the street to the Perrys. Sharon might have rushed over there with Neil if he’d started to get sick.

Steve reached for the phone again. Please God, please let them be at the Perrys’. Let them be all right.

And then he saw it. The message on the memo board. Printed in chalk. Thick, uneven lettering.

“If you want your kid and girlfriend alive, wait for instructions.” The next three words were heavily underlined. “*Don’t call police.*” The message was signed “Foxy.”

Taken from *A Stranger Is Watching* (1977) by Mary Higgins Clark.