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# Footsteps in the Snow



One shocking crime.  
Two shattered families.  
And the coldest case  
in U.S. history.



Charles  
Lachman

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## SYCAMORE, ILLINOIS

**Evening, December 3, 1957**

It was an ordinary night in a small town very few Americans outside its boundaries even knew existed.

It was snowing, just a dusting, and Maria Ridulph, seven years old, was eager to experience the first snowfall of the winter. She had just eaten dinner, and her mother, Frances Ridulph, had given her permission to play outside. Maria ran to the phone and called her best friend from five houses away, Kathy Sigman.

“I can go out! Can you?”

Kathy said she'd be right there.

Maria wanted to wear her new winter coat, but Frances told her no, put on the old one. It was a tan three-quarter-length wool overcoat. One button was missing, and the point of the collar on the right side had been chewed down.

Maria hated the coat because it was a shabby hand-me-down from her brother, Chuck, who was eleven.

Maria and Kathy met at the corner of Archie Place and Center Cross Street and started a game of Duck the Cars, a pastime of their own invention. Whenever a car drove by, they had to duck behind a towering elm tree, and if the headlights hit one of the girls, she'd lose.

At 6 P.M., Frances had to drive her fifteen-year-old daughter, Kay, for a music lesson, and as she backed out of the driveway, she saw Maria on the corner with little Kathy. Frances gave Maria a quick wave, and, ten minutes later, having dropped Kay off, when she got back, she saw that Maria and Kathy were still on the corner jumping up and down.

Inside 616 Archie Place, a modest wood-framed bungalow, Mike Ridulph, the man of the house, was watching a TV western, *Cheyenne*. He was looking forward to a big night on television—Tallulah Bankhead was going to be the guest star on the Lucille Ball show. Pat, the studious eldest Ridulph daughter, was doing homework in the dining room. Chuck, the athlete of the family, was in the den with his best buddy, Randy Strombom, who lived next door. They were going through their baseball-card collections while listening to Elvis Presley on the hi-fi. Frances went to her bedroom and settled down with the evening newspaper, the *Sycamore True Republican*.

Great events were taking place in the world. Sputnik had been launched by the Soviet Union, and the space race was on. These were momentous times. But in Sycamore, the news was strictly small-town America. Three local boys had

been inducted into the armed forces; *Operation Madball*, starring Ernie Kovacs and Jack Lemmon, was playing downtown; lettuce was ten cents a head at the Piggly Wiggly.

Just an ordinary night.

The street was dark and empty; then, out of nowhere, a man they didn't know appeared.

"Hello, little girls," he said, stooping down so his eyes met theirs. "Are you having fun?"

He took off his hat, and the girls saw that he had blond hair in a DA cut, that is, combed back along the sides of the head and parted at the nape of the neck so it looked like a duck's ass. "Would you like a piggyback ride?" he asked, crouching, waiting for one of them to say yes.

The girls looked at each other. Maria's parents had taught her to be wary of strangers; just the same, she climbed onto the man's back. When he rose to his full height, her legs dangling over his chest, he took off in a trot up Center Cross Street, carrying her for some forty feet as snow swirled around them. Kathy stayed there on the corner in the cold under the streetlamp, watching, a little envious that Maria was having all the fun. When they came back, the man bent down, and Maria climbed off his back. She was grinning.

"My name is Johnny," he said. "I'm twenty-four years old, and I'm not married."

He asked their names and they told him. He seemed so nice.

“I’d give you another piggyback ride,” Johnny said to Maria, “if you had a dolly.”

Maria said she had lots of dolls, and she’d be right back with her favorite one.

Kathy found herself standing there alone with Johnny, watching Maria race to her house.

“Kathy, I like you,” he said.

Not knowing what else to say, she said, “I like you, too.”

Johnny put his hand on her arm and asked her whether she’d like to go for a walk around the block with him, then, “What would you like, a bus ride or train ride?”

“I don’t want any ride,” she told him.

For Maria, it was a short dash to 616 Archie Place. She flew into the house, her face flushed from the excitement and night air, found her mother in the bedroom, and asked her if she could take her favorite doll outside. Frances told her to take the cheap rubber one instead because it was still snowing. Frances recalled later that her daughter’s eyes were “beaming,” and she was giddy with excitement.

Maria headed straight for Maria’s Corner, where she kept her doll collection. Her father heard her rummaging around until she grabbed an inexpensive six-inch rubber baby. It was dressed in a red-and-white skirt that had tiny pockets at the hem, with a neatly folded peewee handkerchief inside one of them. Then Mike heard his daughter streak out the front door. His eyes never left the TV.

After a minute or two, Maria, clutching the doll, got back to where Johnny and Kathy were waiting for her. She showed it to Johnny, who expressed his delight with it.

What a pretty dress, he told her, what a pretty doll. As promised, he let her climb onto his back again for her second ride, this time with her doll.

When they got back it was supposed to be Kathy's turn, but she told Johnny that her fingers were getting numb from the cold, and she needed to run home and put on her mittens. She asked him the time. Johnny said it was seven o'clock, and off she went. A few minutes later, she expected to see Johnny and Maria waiting for her. She was looking forward to the nice man's piggyback ride, but the corner where she'd left them was deserted. Where were they?

She went to the Ridulph house and knocked on the side door. Maria's brother Chuck opened it, and Kathy asked him if Maria was there.

No, Chuck told her. "She must be hiding from you," he said.

Kathy left to look for Maria again. She went up and down Archie Place, calling out, "Mah-reeee-ah! Mah-reeee-ah!"

Five minutes later she was back at the Ridulphs' door.

"I can't find Maria," she told Chuck.

Chuck found his mother in the bedroom and told her what was going on. Then Frances told her husband, Mike, and he grabbed a police whistle that he sometimes used to summon the children. Mike and Frances went outside looking for their youngest daughter. They walked to the corner and called out Maria's name. They searched the backyard. Mike blew his whistle.

Chuck grabbed a flashlight and went looking too, with

his friend Randy. They walked down Archie Place and circled the block calling out Maria's name. They stopped at a house on DeKalb Avenue where a friend of Maria's lived, just in case she had gone there, but she hadn't. A squad car drove by, and Chuck wondered whether he should hail it down, but he decided that he and Randy should just keep looking.

With mounting panic, Frances returned home and called Kathy Sigman's mother, Edna. Only then did Frances hear a disturbing story about a stranger who had come out of nowhere to play with the girls. She ran out, hopped in her car, and found Mike, still searching the neighborhood. She told him what she'd just heard from Edna Sigman and said she wanted to call the police, but Mike told her absolutely not. Maria had probably strayed, and they'd find her any minute. It would be "embarrassing" and cause a "commotion" if they called the cops.

The Ridulphs drove to a dead-end street, Roosevelt Court, where Maria sometimes played. Mike got out of his car and blew his police whistle again. A light coming from a house drew his attention. Maybe Maria had come here. Peeking into the living room, all he saw were two elderly ladies watching TV, and he backed off.

When Mike and Frances got back to Archie Place, Frances called Mrs. Sigman one more time. The story was coming out in bits and pieces. Now, little Kathy was saying that the stranger who played with the girls had given Maria a piggyback ride. The full impact of what had happened finally registered, with all its strands of worrisome detail.

*Dear God*, Frances was thinking, *what happened to my daughter?* Frances hung up. Whether her husband approved or not, she was going to tell the police. She charged out the house and drove off.

It was 7:25 P.M.

Kay Ridulph had walked home from her music lesson and found a neighborhood in chaos. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her little sister Maria was missing. She grabbed her brother, Chuck, and together they marched to the Sigmans' house to speak directly to Kathy. The little girl told them about Johnny and the piggyback ride. She described him as a white man, about twenty-four. She said he told them he wasn't married, and one other interesting thing: that Johnny talked "like we used to."

From this, Kay gathered that the kidnapper must be a "hillbilly."

Kay turned to Mrs. Sigman, "Did you tell my mother all this?"

Mrs. Sigman assured her that she had.

Kay hurried back to 616 Archie Place and found her father alone in the house. The time had come to notify the police—Kay insisted—and now even Mike had to agree. He jumped into the family's second car and drove to the Sycamore police department to report a missing child. He didn't need to.

Frances was already there.