

Company

Michael Hawley

If he stuck to that room, I wouldn't do anything. As long as he, or they, just stayed in that room, I told myself, OK, don't make trouble. Not that it didn't shake me hard when I decided it wasn't a raccoon I'd been hearing for almost two weeks, but a flesh and blood person down there in the basement, which hadn't been cleaned since Yvonne was alive. Leave it be, Jeff, I said. Like your hernia. Don't bother it and it won't bother you. I just didn't know what they might try.

I was lying on the couch that night, in the living room of this house I've had for forty years exactly, thirty-eight of those with Vonnie, and the last awful ones. You'd think God'd let you end in a good year, on a good note, but it's gotta be like this, and no signs of improvement. Then me bolting up in the night when I heard—sure as there were teeth in my head—a chair leg scudding on the concrete downstairs. Not a raccoon at all, but a person.

Funny how you shrink, how the world gets so big so fast that you fall through the cracks like an ant. I've lived in Morristown most of my life and never had as much as a burglary, a stolen newspaper. Well, Von was here all the time in the day, and we rarely took off in the last ten years, or went out in the evenings even. I can't account for us, our days and evenings, our lives, from this distance. Time goes too fast not to take stuff for granted. Then it's gone and what's left? This house is all. Its dust and light and darkness. And it's filled with Vonnie and the boys, though that time can't hear me anymore when I talk to it. My talking doesn't reach it at all.

So I stopped talking and started listening. Which sounds like good advice for living, but at a certain age it won't work. Like if a bird on migration stops flying. To just listen after so much talk is like stepping off a cliff. The house began to swell with uselessness. Then cleaning became not just a chore, but a mockery, and all the things in it.

How many days and nights have you spent alone without leaving your house, without the phone ringing? I had eleven days of this together, listening.

When I could not stand it anymore in the house, I sat outside as much as possible, for the listening there was less trialsome. A house has complaints that a yard and trees don't. What everybody hears isn't

quite so oppressive. Some nights, I have slept in the lawn chair out back, though I know the gays don't appreciate it, or the Torreys for that matter. The Torreys don't really like to see me, though they used to come over for bridge sometimes, out of fondness for Vonnie, who had the talent of making people want to please her. It was for her I kept up the house for a while, still trying to make her happy, my Winston diamond.

I've seen raccoons in both front and back yards. When I used to keep the bird feeders full, you could see them every summer night if you shined a flashlight out the back window. Fat as pumpkins, beady-eyed things. Once the seed sack was empty, I never replaced it, never went down to the basement again, except to change a fuse one time. That's all, with knees that can hardly bend and a hair-trigger hernia waiting to spring. Nothing was down there but boxes of junk and worthless furniture and the boys' sports and hobbies stuff, punching bag, empty aquariums, and the pool table. (Here I go, all this talking again.) And whatever's left in the freezer.

I read somewhere that a person's potential is only ever the least bit fulfilled. The rest of the iceberg is hidden under all the conditioning to conform and the no-meaning, all-important surface concerns and the chatter. All put there to keep out the fear of your own personal power. My friends, if I had any left, would laugh. No point to start thinking like that, Jeff, not now. Sure way to suicide now, Socrates.

So when I started trying to listen past the surface—and when the cold weather came, I was forced back into long months of it—sometimes I would get a kind of glow or shimmer of sound above the other sounds, like the bustle of all the possible actions that could be taken in the wasting, drifting moments all around. Or were they actions from another time that had already taken place in the house? *That* was much less frightening to listen to—and when I say fright, it's more sadness than fright, it's regret like an earthquake or falling through the air. But if the silence were occupied, I wasn't so bad, and listening to hear it made a story, and I didn't have to read. And if it's true about potential being pinched by conditioning, then it follows that reason is conditioned, too. Whoa, Jeff! my buddy Stingray would say, You sound like those jazz freaks, man, that we hated! Freeloading "poets" in the park. Maybe lucky for him he died in Korea and never lived to see hippies and punks.

I'm through with you, Stingray. Through with ghosts from the old days. Eisenhower and stupid McCarthy, why I ever believed you. And Nixon, who sent my Jamie to the Laotian panhandle to have his arms blown off. Through. Just like I closed the basement door, and I can hear the final sound of it, as the door was off plumb and I was lucky to be able to close it at all. It would take quite a push to open it again—or quite a yank, for that matter.

Raccoons, I thought, when I first heard the noises, little bumps and scratchings. Maybe skunks. I took a poke around outside to see how the

bastards got in. Sure enough, one of the basement windows—the one behind the snowball bush—was wide open, the screen dangling in. But if I blocked it up, they couldn't get out, though they couldn't get out anyway, I suppose, and I'd be forced to go down, and then what? It was really an exterminator's job.

Our friend Maury, before he got Alzheimer's, had a bat problem. His son found a hole in the roof by the chimney and patched it up for him. Maury and Liz were up for two nights swatting starving refugee bats. Forty-eight they killed with tennis racquets, and Liz, who was an excellent squash and tennis player, was never the same after. She started wearing stocking caps to bed, pulled down over her face.

I put it off a night and a day, then I couldn't find the phonebook. So I'd tell the grocery boy when he came. He's Latino and brings me free cookies and talks about going to Kingdom Hall. But it was a different delivery kid the next time, a pasty fat girl who didn't much like her job, and she wouldn't even come into the house.

Every once in a while Matt Torrey visits. He dropped in before he went on vacation, but his air was so snooty that I never mentioned my little houseguests. I like him less and less. Smug jerk with his bleached teeth and his new wife and his electric-hybrid car. Explaining to me like I'd never read about them—his Toyota Prius—like I hadn't taught Science for forty years at the high school, or read the paper, or turned on the television. (When I read that Jack Paar died, I couldn't stop crying. The only celebrity Vonnie ever wanted to meet.)

So a week went by and I kept telling myself that I had to face the situation. Let one thing slide and before you know it . . . But it wasn't like I heard the noises constantly. Maybe once or twice a week. And if I wasn't really listening, I wouldn't hear it at all probably. Besides, the new presence there seemed to add more life to the house, another layer of business, which I found less and less disturbing. Not like bats would be. And what's the difference between dust compiling and doors warping versus a little varmint action, as long as they aren't in the kitchen cupboards or chewing my toes in the night?

There's a box in the basement with my wife's collection of antique bed dolls, which I had promised to send to her twin sister, but Vera drowned this summer in the Delaware, when her kayak overturned. I had packed the dolls in newspaper and Styrofoam popcorn. I could picture the raccoons nosing the box, intrigued by the sound of the Styrofoam popcorn squeaking against itself. I even dreamed that the dolls themselves came to life (Stingray's shaking his head right now), and were crawling around the concrete floor of the basement on their bellies with their heads turned up like they are. It gave me the creeps, and I could only wish that skunks or raccoons would eat it all up and be done, pool table, everything, so if I poked my head down there, I'd find nothing more than some loamy piles of digested wood, cardboard and Styrofoam.

My usual grocery boy was back the next Friday.

"Ramón!" I said, trying not to act so desperately friendly. "Come in."

He put the two bags on the kitchen table and took from his coat the twin-cookie pack. He said nothing about the previous week and I didn't bring it up. He left me one of the Watchtower papers and invited me to the Hall.

"I don't drive anymore, Ramón," I said, writing out the check.

He said that his mother would be glad to take me. We had had this discussion before. His eyes were so dark, so young. That silver thing he had in his lip, I had grown almost fond of it. I tried not to look at him. I gave him his tip. He asked if anything was wrong.

"Of course not. A bit of the gout, you know. Arthritis, phlebitis, boils, leprosy, gangrene and heart palpitations. Not to worry, *amigo*."

He smiled, put the dollar in his pocket, and shook my hand. God bless you, Mr. Davidson, he said. God bless you, Jeff. God bless, goodbye. In the screen door breeze, I could smell his cologne. I should have given him two dollars. Would he have stayed longer then?

When he was gone, I could sense the shift of atoms in the house. I left the groceries—except for the milk—in their bags, not wanting to stir things more. I put on my shoes to take a walk up the street, but sat down in Vonnie's rocker. Shadows cast by the slats of the blinds played across the walls. Where to walk and why bother? What was this fantasy of what a walk could do? There was nothing I hadn't seen before, no smell I'd never smelled. I'd nod as I always did to those I recognized, all strangers. I sat back and tried to sweep the chatter clean, the echoes of Ramón.

The chair creaked, then the floorboards under the carpet. I sat absolutely still, looking at the couch with the crumpled old red blanket almost ground into the cushions. Looked like a rape scene. Without shifting my eyes I took account of all the objects in the room just as if my gaze were moving slowly clockwise. The grandfather clock. The display rack of souvenir spoons from all the places we went. The vacuum cleaner, left out since last use, still plugged in. TV and VCR. Lamp with the plastic "Tiffany" shade. When the inventory passes peripheral vision, this becomes a challenging exercise, and much harder to do than if your eyes are closed. A thorough accounting can take an hour. You should try it, all the crap around you wherever you are, how ever well you think you know it. Or flexing a finger so slowly you're not even sure it's moving. I've done this where it took twenty minutes. To reach your potential of realization you'd need a lifetime just to cross the room. Put the brakes on, Jeff! A regular Buddha, you.

When the porch light switched on at seven o'clock, I watched it feed through the blinds until hunger forced me up. Such an appetite after sitting all day? Soup in the nuker, and the telephone rings, novelty of novelties. Glad I paid the bill.

“Hello?”

The voice on the line came stumbling through. Jamie in California. Blubbering. He hasn't called even semi-sober since his mother died. I shouted at him the last time and hung up. It was Christmas. This time, I just tried to make out the words, let him talk. Because he never answers questions, anything that'll give the slightest notion as to what's going on in his life. I know things aren't easy, and his assistance just got clipped. Gotta send another probe to Jupiter, can't take care of our war vets.

“Yes, it's been cool this summer, lots of rain this summer, yeah,” I said. “What? What kind of job? That's good, Jamie. Your mother would be proud.” Which I shouldn't have said, because it set him off. “What difference would that make, Jamie? You're too drunk to talk. No, I'm *not* angry! Jesus, Jamie! What? My knees are bad, nothing new. Call me when you're—” The dial tone funneled into my ear and I held the receiver till it started beeping.

So I had *that* to deal with all evening, wanting to break out the bottle myself, though I had stopped drinking when Vonnie joined AA in the 70s, just out of respect for her.

God forgive me, but I wished he hadn't called. He was older than *me* inside, worn out and lonelier. I went to bed just to end the day, but the day wasn't finished with me yet. No amount of listening tricks would keep the talking down. Like fireworks in a cavern. Roll out the three-ring circus, boys. Jamie at every age, every picture taken up to Vietnam. Is he still in Sacramento, I wonder? Or Sausalito. No souvenir spoon from the Golden State. Could never pin him down that long. For a guy without arms, he gets around. Whatever job he claimed to have, I couldn't make out what it was.

I shifted onto my side, the couch springs groaning, and that hernia just waiting to pop. Far off, at least a block away, a car alarm tripped.

Then I started to think about Frankie, our tow-haired youngest, so into fish that we called him Jacques Cousteau. Our first tragedy, snuffed out at age seven by a hit and run driver.

I ran my hand over my face. The room persisted. I was hungry still. Dinty Moore was not enough to keep out the falling feeling. Lump in my throat like a rubber egg. You're not actually gonna cry, are ya Jeff? “There, there”: the lovely Von, her lacquered lashes batting: “Is Frankie still at the fish store, puddin'? You better drive over there.” Hot swell of tears coming. You're really *not* gonna cry, Jeff.

Then I heard the sound in the basement, sure as if the doorbell rang. The sound of wooden chair legs scudding across a floor. Somebody's down there moving furniture! Sitting up, I reached for the cane. Silence followed. Then I heard what sounded like the rattling of jars in Jamie's old room, where we kept all that stuff from the year 2000, when all the computers were gonna shut down the universe. Then nothing. One minute, five minutes.

What was it that kept me from reaching for the phone? Denial or laziness. John Wayne bravado—a touch maybe? Shit-scared panic?

I got up and started shuffling around, slamming doors and turning on lights, TV, whatever might discourage a burglar but not enough to provoke confrontation. If he got in through the basement window, it would not be an easy thing to get out. Already, I think, I was starting to realize that it wasn't a burglar but a house guest down there. Someone, or *ones*, had been living there for weeks. I never felt so scared in my life as I did, I think, right then. It's a hotel you're running, Jeff. Shit! A regular boarding house. Think! There wasn't a lock on the basement door either. If it opened outward, I could at least block it shut.

But if they'd been here that long and hadn't tried to come up, they just wanted to be left alone, didn't they? Homeless. Drug addicted. Like the crackheads I'd seen coming out of Penn Station the last time we went to the city. Twitchy little hornet people scratching at their faces. My house guest would have to be very skinny to slink in and out through the window. I couldn't do it if life depended, but Jamie used to do it all the time, sneaking out at night to meet friends. It's a kid, then, or some wiry, withered-up crack junky. He was getting bolder, making noises, moving furniture at random and bumping around in the dark. Looking for something to sell for a fix. He wouldn't dare use a flashlight!

Hold on, Jeff. A coon or a cat, if it leapt from a chair, could make the legs creak like that. I stood in the dining room holding the cane. Out the dining room window I could see that the lights were still on at the Torrey's. It wasn't so late, then. A large woman—not Mrs. Torrey—got up from a chair in their dim living room. She stood facing me, lit up by the wash of TV light. Big woman, dressed in her nightgown. At first I thought it was a gun in her hand, but it was one of those all-in-one remotes. She kept aiming at the intended target, trying to turn it off. The Torrey's were away, up to Maine, I remembered, and Matt's mother was watching the house.

Should I call over there? Bother a woman as old as I am with something that would frighten her more than it did me likely? What if it was just a coon after all, a cat even? Wait. She was waving at me and scowling. She had caught me staring. I waved back, dumbly, and stepped toward the window. My intention was to draw the curtain in order to explain my position there. She turned abruptly and left the room, the TV blinking on her back. I left the curtains open, not wanting to feel further shut off, and went back to the living room.

If they were holing up in Jamie's room, I should go to the den directly over it and listen. I moved very slowly—like the flexing finger routine almost—and easy as I could to the den. I left the light off and got down on my knees, then flattened myself to the floor. Not without several boards creaking. I lay there, ear to carpet, feeling my own bulk on top of me. They must know I was up here and listening for them, or they were

in another part of the basement.

Jamie in college brought a guy home once that he'd met at Port Authority. They had both been to some protest in Washington. Jamie volunteered us to house him for a week, so he stayed on the couch in the basement. We didn't like him. Having a pinko for a son was one thing, but bringing in a full-fledged hippie wasn't something we cottoned to much. Vonnie was gracious, but I could tell that a stranger in the house made her nervous. Vonnie stuck to the den a lot in those days. Before she joined AA, the room was like a shrine to Frankie and a place for steady drinking. Sober, she turned it into a sewing room, her "sanity room," she called it. We had more changes of curtains that year than the whole damn town put together.

Was that music? They wouldn't dare be playing a radio down there. The disk jockey in your head, Jeff, old Al Jarvis. Nat King Cole, Hank Williams, Peggy Lee. *Not possible, puddin'*. But I could swear I heard Peggy Lee: "If that's all there is, my friend..." Music verging to static to music to radio announcer. I couldn't convince myself that I wasn't hearing it: "...let's break out the booze..."

I read in the paper about a famous astronomer who reported wheel-like spokes on the surface of Venus a hundred years ago. Canals dug by an ancient race, his theory. No modern-day telescope had revealed such a thing. Turns out that, in order to cut the glare from the planet, he had to radically narrow the aperture of the telescope, and because of that, what he was really seeing were the shadows of the blood vessels in his own retina. Precious.

I pushed myself to my knees, then stood, using the sewing table for leverage. My head spun. I was sweating. Through the den window I could see my other neighbors. The "Feldman-O'Reilly's." Mike and Patrick, the architects. There was a dozen people over there. Maybe that was the music I heard. They were having a party for their professional friends, showing off their latest improvements. Italian tile and copper fixtures. In the bedroom, a young lady in a blue dress sat on the bed with Patrick O'Reilly. A bearded man stood beyond them, holding two wine glasses and dancing by himself. From what I could see, all the men were pansies, nothing against them. But it's not like Morristown is Manhattan, though the property values seem set that direction. I stepped to the window and pulled down the shade.

What would the Torreys or the architects do if they knew about my problem? They wouldn't like it. They who throw parties and go on vacations to Maine. Not at all, they wouldn't. They would blame me for letting it happen to begin with, for inviting it even.

I left the den and closed the door, the slam of it like a gun blast. I heard the shade flap up inside, and a knickknack or something hit the floor.

If a person can dream without going to sleep, I dreamed that night that I called the cops. Not 911, but HQ downtown, because I got out the phonebook to find it. Like all those kinds of dreams, first you can't find the phone book, then you can't find the number, then you keep misdialing, then you get static or the line goes dead. When it finally rang on the other end, it was my brother-in-law, Stan, who answered. He was crying, sobbing, going on about Vonnie drowning in the Delaware. I kept telling him it was Vera that drowned and Von had died of cancer, but he wouldn't believe me, and I got so angry I swore at him, and he's really religious so he hung up on me.

As the bars of sunlight grew on the wall, I sat staring at the phone on the coffee table like paralysis had set in. Like Jamie staring drunk and armless at his custom speaker phone. I wasn't going to call the cops. The easiest, most logical thing in the world, I wasn't going to do it. More likely ring the exterminator or the ASPCA: "Hi, I've been hearing noises in the basement going on about three weeks. I think there's a stray cat down there, some kind of animal." They'd probably tell me to call the police. I used to know a guy on the force, Caesar Palomino, what a name. I have his cell phone number somewhere. The officer who found Frankie on the bridge. He'd stop in periodically though our street was off his beat. He came to Frankie's funeral. Last I saw him, he'd gained even more weight than I had.

Dust lined the coffee table. The whole house needed cleaning. Not a wonder I never had visitors. After fixing an egg, I got out the Windex, what was left of it, and the last of the paper towels, and started right there in the living room. It's the dusting part of the deal that gets you, the perpetual fallout—especially the blinds, where a damp rag doesn't work on the dust. It just streaks.

The roar of the Hoover comforted, a voice from the past that wasn't depressing, just oblivious and purposeful. The bag hadn't been changed in a year probably. I ran it around the wood floor of the dining room, then back to the den. There I picked up the small oval picture frame that had fallen the night before. It was of Vonnie and Vera as teenagers, the one where even I couldn't tell them apart. I cleared out some of the smaller furniture and vacuumed around the rest. I ran it a good long time. Keep my boarder on his toes. It's not all ghost time here, not yet. I Hoovered some more in the living room, then just let it run in the corner until it started coughing like it always does when the bag's too full.

Cutting it off was like stepping into space. The silence of Orion's Belt or after the ultimate bomb. It was something I didn't have to listen through, not a surface silence. Pure and almost radiant it came, all apertures wide open to the universe. I could feel it all through my body.

You dead, Jeff?

I looked at the mantel clock. Only 9:30.

I moved to the dining room, the silence unbroken, like a kind of shellac over everything, even the dust on the walnut sideboard. I glanced through

the window at the Torrey house, wondering if the woman there was awake yet. Poor cow had thought I was spying on her. My knees pained as I walked to the kitchen. After a shower, lunch and a nap, I would wash that pile of dishes. Dust and dishes. Poops and pishes. Laundry. Store list. I wrote on the notepaper pad on the counter:

windex
eggs 2 dz

The sound of the pen tip scratched lightly at the silence, like a fingernail on stone:

feather duster
paper to...ls
pens that write
baked beans

There was a shift in the air, like a tug. Somebody was in the house. And not downstairs in the basement either. I could feel it. I put down the pen. I pictured him standing in the dining room, running a finger over the sideboard, plowing a trail through the dust. Someone was there. If I turned my head quick, I'd see him—one side of his face, a single eye—peering cautiously in from the dining room.

Nobody's there, Columbo. You'd've heard him yank open the basement door, cross the creaky floors.

I slowly tore off the page of the notepad so it made as much noise as possible. Clearing my throat, I stepped toward the fridge and secured it on the door with the Eiffel Tower magnet Stan and Vera had brought back from Europe.

"Another place we never got to, huh?" I said it not waiting for any response, but just to let him know that I knew he was there.

Against the drum-skin hood of silence came an unmistakable flick of acknowledgment, not audible exactly, but definite. Like a rubber stamp pressing its ink on a page. Certified.

No choice now. I did my old inventory trick, keeping my eyes on the Eiffel Tower. To the right of the fridge, next to the toaster and a canister of sugar and the wall phone, sat the butcher block knife rack. With only the handles protruding, I wouldn't know which one to go for. The carving knife, if I remembered, was in the middle slot. If I could move that fast. You're a big guy, Jeff. Don't worry with knives. Just stand straight so they can see you still got it. You still could floor somebody.

I felt the adrenaline pumping then, like part of the silence, and I wasn't separate from it, just separate from *him*, the outsider. I centered my weight and flexed my knees, took a step, turned. He had vanished. I stalked right into the dining room after him. He wasn't there either. No

sign but a finger stripe on the top of the sideboard.

Certified: Nuts.

And what would you do, Stingray, you bastard? If you had the chance to get old like me and see it all go, or if you had to live your life with prosthetic arms, your boxing dream shot to shit, the ladies giving you pity looks? Broken, weepy drunk you'd be, instead of cut in stone for Memorial Day and Old Eisenhower Glory. For what? What happened to you should have kept my Jamie out of that part of the world.

If my guest—my boarder—had been upstairs, he wasn't anymore. He'd slipped like a weasel back into his hole, having sniffed out and taken his measure of me. Shape shifter. I ran my finger along the sideboard next to the streak that was there. Is that why Von had been so obsessive with cleaning after her diagnosis? To prevent any proof of expired time from imposing its mark on the house? To keep all seams of death from showing?

Those last months, she'd made lists for me. At least ten things to do each day of the week. Mostly outdoor stuff until they upped her dose of the painkiller and she slept most of the time on the couch. The nurse would come by on Tuesdays and Fridays. The most formal little Jamaican lady, Georgina Eliot-Cross. Vonnie called her Regalina for the way she carried herself. I always had coffee waiting for her, even the last Friday morning, when Vonnie lay dead on the couch. She had stopped breathing some time in the night. I couldn't bring myself to call Vera. Instead, I went out and ran the Weed Whacker around the front steps and the hedges, and clipped the dead blooms from the potted petunias, ticking off the list of chores that Von might have written for me. Put the recycling out in the alley. The nurse came at 10:30 sharp. We drank our cups of coffee in the dining room. Then she called the morgue for me, but not the funeral home.

"Dat is your job, Mr. Davidson. It will help you simply to do what you must. Right down de line. No tings left to dangle. And if you know dem at all, tell de neighbors. Dey should know." She had put her gloved hand on mine and pressed it.

Right down the line.

I put on my loafers and a jacket, ran a comb through my hair in the bathroom and threw back some mouthwash. I walked out the front of the house, bending down to pick up the newspaper. On the front page, two photos—before and after—of the girl they found on the turnpike. Still more on the governor scandal, of course, and this year's Nobel prizes. I folded the paper and tucked it under my arm. It was the first chilly day in October.

Outside, the silence was like a deep ravine, though I could hear the blue jays in the maple tree and frost crunching under my shoes as I cut through the lawn to the gays'. They had sent a bouquet of gladiolas to the funeral home. I don't think I had ever thanked them. I could do so

now, maybe, and segue somehow to my little dilemma. If Matt Torrey were home, I would have gone there.

I could not hear the bell when I pressed it. I rang again. No one home, or they weren't awake yet, or they saw it was me and didn't answer. Pots of mixed flowers were placed at odd intervals around the sides of the house, each boiling over with flowers—dahlias, mums, grasses, plants I didn't know. Risky to call attention with all that artsy stuff. Bega a break-in.

I crossed back to my own shabby camp, sneaking a look at the scraggly hydrangea that hid my broken basement window. The jays made a screeching ruckus overhead. Somebody called my name. A woman's voice: "Mr. Davidson." I looked up at the Torrey's screen porch. She was sitting there, wedged in the rocking chair.

"Good morning," I said, walking closer. "Sorry about last night."

She introduced herself as Rebecca, and explained what I already knew about her staying there. She asked me in. We sat on the porch and chatted. I was surprised to hear so much of my voice, popping in and out of its hole like a ground squirrel: the first frost, the architects' lawn, the chronic car alarm down the block. We talked about the girl in the paper, abducted right out of her house. Such times.

"No wonder I took you by surprise last night, by yourself in a house not yours."

The more we talked, the more the silence thawed. Like the polar cap under the ozone hole. A feeling of relief seeped into me, overwhelming for its pleasantness, but oppressive too, because the more we talked, the more I knew I couldn't tell her about my visitor, much as I wanted to. And I kept seeing my double, trapped and alone in the house next door, looking at me on the porch with Rebecca, gabbing like a goose, as my Gramps used to say.

Rebecca was looking at her lap, suddenly. She'd stopped talking, just like that, like the tape had run out or I had said something way off mark. She caught my eye and glanced away. Had I stayed too long? Before I could quite put thought to action, goddamn it if she didn't excuse herself without making the slightest move to get up. Here I was getting ready to scam and the witch had to make me feel like an idiot. Come on, Jeff, no bones, now. Maybe her laxative just kicked in. She waved at me even, like she was setting off on the QE2, and gave me a fat, phony smile. I could feel it drilling into my back. Poor Davidson, she must have been thinking, all patched together, unshaven, eating God knows what in that hovel of his, lowering property values. Misses his wife, of course, and that's natural, though she was kind of a boozier, wasn't she? Water under the bridge, though, or Tanqueray, whichever.

Stepping in, I realized I didn't have the paper. I had left it on the card table on the Torrey's porch. Hell if I was going back. Like I would miss something indispensable if I didn't read it that morning. Someone

dropping bombs somewhere. An astronomer finding new worlds in his eyeball. Nobel prizes. Gay matrimony. The latest celebrity death.

The house was breathing all around me. Breathing its usual claustrophobic monotony, but tinged with something else. I could deal with an empty shell, some dry and dusty wasp nest monument. As a kid, if you cut with a very sharp knife through the gray paper globe of a wasp nest, you'd find nothing, maybe one or two dead drones, and a construction that had supported perfectly its builder-occupants. Like Mesa Verde or that place in Peru. That I could live with. That kind of thing made a sad old sense. Not a house with a wormy foundation, with a sleeping tarantula at its core.

In the back hall, between the basement door and the clothes dryer, sat the wooden tool chest Jamie had built for an Eagle Scouts carpentry project. Most any of the blunt/sharp objects would do. I picked out a long-handled claw hammer, one of Granddad's old numbers. A kind of tool you don't find anymore, maybe one he welded himself from different parts to suit a special chore. Its handle was bound with electrical tape, sticky slightly. I let the lid of the chest bang shut. "J.D." in Gothic letters had been emblazoned with a wood-burning tool. The hammer was light enough to swing easy and weighted enough to hit hard. Sink a hole in a skull, for sure, crack a femur.

I gave the door a trial push. As hard as I had slammed it before, it was still only half-way into the jamb. The top had give to it; where it was stuck was lower down. All it needed was a quick, hard butt with the shoulder. Just keep the weight hunkered to avoid a tumble down. No guts, no glory, ay, Stingray?

One blow to the door sent it shuddering inward. Noise enough in the emptiness. And the chasm waiting, staring up through the murky light. I took a step down, one hand on the rail, one on the hammer.

"I'm coming down, you!"

The pain like needles in my knees. I could see well enough, though the light seeping through the basement windows had a fuzzy quality, the smell of mildew in it. My eye lit on the stack of boxes sitting at the foot of the stair. Books and records meant to go to Saint Vinnie's. Undisturbed. But the freezer by the wall—hadn't I set the box of bed dolls on it?

"Don't make any trouble! I don't want to have to use this!" My heart was doing the Indie 500.

On the far side of the basement, past the furnace and the hot water heater, the door to Jamie's room was shut. Didn't mean the intruder wasn't crouched behind the furnace, or holed up under the pool table, waiting.

"I've called the police! They're coming! Hear me?"

Frankie's aquariums sat on the pool table, those two 20-gallon tanks that had held his precious angelfish. All he wanted, neon tetras and angelfish. He wouldn't sleep for days on end, watching and fretting over

them. Till the last ones brought some virus in and the whole thing went to shit. Happy birthday.

By the wall were two old dining chairs and something sprawled between them on the floor, black and mound-like. Jamie's punching bag. It had come loose from its mount on the beam and clipped the chairs when it fell.

Jesus, Jeff, you freak. All night I'd been afraid of this, terrified, like an old woman. A knot in my stomach that I had forgotten was there eased off.

"Don't make any trouble," I said to the bag and set my foot on it, feeling a pang in the knee. Wouldn't Jamie have a laugh on me. Give it the old one-two, Sugar Ray. You don't need fists to KO the sucker. Just enough time, bring everybody down.

I gazed around me. The fusty, dank oblivion down there, a kind of comfort after the scare. My first record player, the old Zenith Twin Seven, sat on an empty bookshelf, along with Yatzee and Scrabble and a bunch of other taped-together board games and jigsaw puzzle boxes. People weren't meant to live like this, with the useless, piled-up past.

The hammer. It looked like something from an Amish village or colonial days, like Williamsburg, with all the folks dressed up in the period, and the blacksmith shop and carriages. Though she got a souvenir spoon from there anyway, Vonnie was bored with Williamsburg. So we went on to Virginia Beach. That was '89, I think. After that, we went nowhere, since she didn't seem to want to. Once I proposed we go looking for Jamie out in California. "And what if we found him, puddin'?" she said, her eyes off somewhere far and unreachable.

I was about to head back for the steps when I heard it—a rustling noise in Jamie's old room. It gave me a turn, just for a minute, and I stood there trying different grips on the hammer. Bastard. It would corner up under the bed, most likely, unless the closet door was ajar. Raccoons can bite. Raccoons can be rabid. God, I hoped it wasn't a skunk. But better to have a skunk in my basement, and not a human being, someone desperate and alone, haunted eyes just crouched to pounce. Better a skunk, some mangy rodent making a mess, chewing up everything, squeezing out slimy, pearl-eyed pups.

"I've got a gun, you son of a bitch, and I'll use it!"

The door flew back when I pulled it. Blinking into the twilight, stepping into the ghostlight, yes—the screen was flopped in up above and the glass window pane was slid open, left open. The box marked "Vera" sat on the bed, Jamie's spring-shot old twin bed. The box was ripped open, Styrofoam packing dumped over the mattress. A bed doll, dressed in candy cane colors and with a pointed cap, lay on its stomach in the wreckage, its elfin face turned up, grinning. There were clumps of rodent shit on the carpet, and the wood of the night stand was all scratched up, really mauled. A box by the wall was torn open, too, and a heap of

floury stuff—from a carton of emergency foodstuffs, Nabisco Saltines or Bisquick, whatever the hell it was, just a mess—lay in clumpy mounds on the carpet. And it was rank in there, between the moldy carpet and the coon shit all over.

It moved again. It was under the bed. It put out a sound I'd never heard in my life. Part hiss, part squeal.

"God damn you, rat, get outa there!" I whacked at the mattress and the packing bounced up. I hit it again. I should go get the flashlight. "God damn you!"

The thing made a noise like a gulp, then a growl. I heard it shift forward, brushing against the springs of the bed. It was one big coon for sure. I'd better be ready with one blow to kill it. And there it was. Its head poked out: bristly hairs and bulge of dark forehead. It wasn't a coon or a skunk either one. I stood aside from the door, hammer poised. I didn't want it to feel completely trapped, in case I missed it or didn't kill it. Risk a bite then, really, or a wicked scratch.

It ambled out, long spines on its shoulders like a skirt, all stiff. Quills. My god, I'd never seen one so close, never seen one at all except up in a tree. Don't wanna get near that, Jeff. Remember Grandpa's German shepherd with the quills like nails pounded into her gums. Something was wrong with it. It turned kind of, tilting to the right, or that's just the way it moved. It was immense, and I hoped it was true that a porcupine couldn't really shoot its quills, because they lifted up in a freakish bank as it turned its back to me.

"Turn around, you!"

I would have to hit his head to kill him. The hammer handle, as long as it was, wasn't long enough to just saunter up and take a quick swipe. My gut was fluttering. When he turned, he would rush me. When he turned, that was it. One chance with the hammer, then I'd have to get out. He faced the wall, each missile set to launch.

Moment of truth, old buddy, said Stingray. Moment of God's-honest truth.

I don't know how many minutes passed just watching that back and tail of quills. The pathetic whining put me off the most. He certainly had some kind of injury. He was old if nothing else, this porky, years and years past prime. He must have tumbled by mistake through the window, drawn to the brink by some smell or sound. By the way he pressed against the wall, he seemed to think that a crack would open in the concrete, making a tunnel for escape. I could see his face in profile. Beaver nose and teeth and forehead, a coal-dark, wild eye. He scraped a paw against the wall and whimpered viciously. I felt the prickle of my own quills standing on my head. Come on, you bastard! Turn!

Instead of meeting my challenge or streaking for the door, he put his quills at half-mast and lumbered back under the bed. But I could still see his tail, the sleek black hairs, the bone-white quills—triggered by muscles

only porcupines must have—ready to teach a lesson to anything dumb enough to try to force an issue. He sat there twitching, but not making a sound. He might have been taking an inventory of his own, naming all the things around him: night stand, bed doll, man at the door, every little nugget of Stryrofoam, each one of his miserable scats. Poor bastard.

I heard the telephone ring upstairs. Far away it sounded, many levels up, through the ghostlight and mildew and dust. Eocene, Pleistocene. It rang just once, or I only heard it once. And though I knew it wouldn't ring again, I couldn't help but listen. Stan or Jamie or those telemarketers, polling people. Maybe Stingray's trickster ghost in the line. One ring and no more, though I waited.

The porcupine stayed quiet. I could sense his rodent nostrils working. I could picture his coal-black, savage eyes, unblinking in the darkness.

I left the room, still listening like that, and carefully closed the door.