

The Intruders

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In the geriatric wing of the hospital, the nurses come at nine

a.m. and present Carl and his father, Bernard, with a menu for lunch. Turkey breast with lettuce and tomato or bologna with cheese. They search his covers for the remote that operates the elevation of the hospital bed. Carl holds the button down while the bed makes a sound like a garage door lifting. The top half of his father's body rises until his face is level with Carl's, and Carl notices that whoever shaved him stopped at his chin, leaving the skin below his jaw covered in coarse, white whiskers.

"Not much of a choice, is it," Carl says, putting the pencil in Bernard's swollen hand, helping him curl his fingers around it. He watches him draw a giant x in the box next to the turkey option.

"I told them I never ate bologna in my life. I don't want to see a bologna sandwich. I don't want to even smell it. Kids used to bring that crap to school, I would almost vomit right there in the cafeteria. Now I'm here and I'm old and they're trying to serve me the slop they feed to school kids."

Carl's wife, Diane, and his daughter, Sandy, arrive hurriedly and apologetically, bringing with them a wind of fresh air and perfume.

"I told you the tunnel would be a nightmare," Bernard says, opening his arms to receive their hugs. When they find chairs and everyone is settled, Bernard tells them about the day so far, about the choices on the menu, and they agree with him about the turkey.

After a while, the doctor stops in and looks not at his patient, but at Carl. He says he thinks Bernard's numbers will be right for surgery by tomorrow, but that they're putting him on the schedule for the afternoon just to be safe. He is a tall man, with an asymmetrical haircut like Carl sees kids wearing in the city, and long, thin fingers that he will use to repair Carl's father's heart.

Before leaving, he pats Carl's father on the knee and says, "We'll get you out of here soon enough, buddy!"

The moment they're alone, Bernard beckons the family closer. "Don't listen to a word this bozo says," he tells them. "That nice nurse that comes in here—she says I'm looking so good maybe they won't have to operate at all."

"Now come on, Dad," Carl says. "We've been through this." And he suddenly feels uncomfortable in a way he can't quite name.

"Don't be a baby, Pop." Diane says. "We need you strong."

Lunch comes an hour late, and Carl watches his father hoist

his legs up and swing them over the side of the bed, notices the way the flesh of his thighs hangs off the bone like a woman's legs. Carl looks over at Sandy, who, even at thirty-two with a child of her own, seems to glow with youth next to all this decay: her skin, brown and freckled from summer weekends on the shore, her hair matted and slightly tangled the way it used to be when she wouldn't let her mother touch it with a brush. He lets his eyes rest on her for a while, enjoys the momentary escape. Then he hears something like a growl and then a crash. He turns to see the plastic dish spinning on the linoleum floor like a giant coin, white bread and slices of bologna and American cheese scattered on the floor.

"Don't you people understand I haven't eaten all day?" Carl's father says, looking around quickly from face to face, the plate still rattling on the floor, taking forever to land still. Everyone is silent, standing back as if they were now in the presence of something wild. But no one is actually afraid of an old man, Carl thinks, only afraid that he might do something that will make them feel uncomfortable. No one likes being reminded of death.

Driving home, tapping her lacquered nails against the wheel,

Diane says, "What do you think it is with him? Like he's never been in the hospital before. Like he didn't get through that bypass with flying colors."

Carl is in the passenger's seat, watching the pavement beneath them, dark and slick with rain, the patches of woods lining Route 23 shockingly green and lush in contrast.

"That was over a decade ago. He's that much older now."

"No," Diane says. "No way. It can't have been that long."

"Sandy had to come home from college, remember?"

Her silence tells him that she does.

After a minute she startles him by making a sudden retching sound. Carl jerks around not knowing what to expect.

"Disgusting! You didn't see that?" she says.

"What," says Carl.

"Another coyote. They're everywhere. This one looked like a giant drowned rat from the rain. Like it crawled out of the sewer. Yuck."

They drive silently for a while, the sound of the wet road beneath them like peeling Velcro. At the light Carl turns to see Diane facing him, the windshield wipers moving patches of red and green across her face.

"You never look in time," she says.

Carl opens his eyes as the spaces between the blinds on his bedroom windows begin to glow with blue light. Next to him, under the rippled stripes the blinds project, is only a motionless cocoon of white down comforter, with hair, tinted red for the last decade or so, sprouting from the top. It is hard to believe, Carl thinks, that if he pulled back the covers, there would actually be a living, breathing woman there.

Carl's mouth is dry and filmy, and he can suddenly taste the gulp of whiskey he'd taken in the night. Bothered by the taste in his mouth, he forces himself out of bed, and as he staggers down the dark hallway, his hands searching the wall for the bathroom door, he remembers that he had dreamt about being a kid and standing knee deep in water at the beach. He could tell he was a kid only because he looked down and noticed his legs, thin and hairless. He remembers standing

there with the water sloshing around them, the way the receding tide pulled at his bare feet and ankles as they sunk farther and farther into the wet sand. He remembers the distant chatter of his mother and his aunts from under the umbrella, drinking grape soda from a glass bottle, and feeling repulsed by the bitter smell of his father's breath, who had been drinking from it before him. He woke with a turning stomach and a full bladder.

Carl falls back into bed and closes his eyes. Diane is undisturbed by all this movement. For the entirety of their marriage, she has slept with the heaviness of a child, unaware of the cacophony this sleep produced. When she first dozed off, she slipped into deep, groaning snores that reminded Carl of sneaking into his parents' room at night and watching his father sleep, wanting him to wake up but also terrified of the consequences, daring himself to get closer and closer. The snoring would gradually morph into heavy breathing that was sometimes raspy when she was congested and clear and hollow sounding when she wasn't. Sometimes she would pass gas loudly enough that her eyelids flickered and her breathing quickened momentarily, before she fell back into an even more tranquil sleep. Very early in their marriage, he realized he would be prisoner to these sounds. He'd always been a difficult sleeper, and as a young man he didn't like women to spend the night. But this was always overpowered by physical desire—it was a sacrifice he was willing to make. Still, there was a night after Sandy was born when, between her crying and his wife's snoring and breathing and farting, he had a premonition of years and years of sleepless nights, and felt powerless before his fate.

Carl squeezes his eyes shut tight until he sees bursts of color on the backs of his eyelids and tries to make himself think about a girl he used to know when he worked at a camp in the Berkshires in high school, but soon he slips in and out of dreams again that start with quick, vivid flashes of her hair that was so shiny and blonde it seemed almost as translucent in the sun as her thin, white t-shirts.

Soon she turns ethereal, her face becomes indistinct, and then hair and t-shirts become Diane's lipstick, bleeding into the creases of her mouth. He thinks about the way her body looks when she is in the bathtub: her breasts spread out over the pillowy-ness of her stomach, suspended in still, murky water. He opens his eyes wide, tries to remember the logic of this sequence but can't, and is left with an inexplicable feeling of shame. And then he hears shuffling and a shadow by the foot of his bed; he can see the unmistakable shape of the sunken torso and high, bony shoulders revolving slowly forward. When he sees the tail, hovering parallel to the ground, Carl knows with utter certainty that a coyote has gotten into his bedroom.

"Dad." She said it sharply, exasperatedly, emphasizing the consonants and shortening the single vowel, so that the address, which, in the last few decades had become more his name than anything else, sounded sterile, drained of all familiar connotation. It echoed in his head like *dead* or *dud*.

"Dad, you've got to get rid of that gun." He could hear his grandson in the background, the way he sort of growled at his toys.

"Alright honey," he said. "Whatever you want. It's Poppy's antique, you know. He used to put it out on the mantel just when your Aunt Jean's boyfriends came over." He couldn't help but let out a short laugh at this, unable to accurately express the vividness of the memory: the way his father would take down his Webley, which Carl always thought was just a funny name he had given it, and place it in Carl's twelve-year-old hands. He was surprised at how comfortable it felt—not much heavier than the toy guns Carl had vowed to stop playing with once he started junior high. He remembers looking straight into the muzzle, which, also to his surprise, was hexagonal rather than round, and imagining strange, hexagonal bullets blowing hexagonal holes through their victims. *Okay now, treat her with respect*, his father would say. *She's even older than your old Dad*.

"Daddy," Sandy said. "It's a *deadly weapon*."

She and Brian had been fighting about this, he could tell they had. Those were his words, not hers. Carl tried to imagine what the conversation had been like—how much of a fight Sandy had put up, if it had been in the car with Tommy in the car seat, or at night, getting ready for bed, or in the middle of the night when neither of them could sleep. Carl grimaced at the thought of Sandy in bed with this man, who could tell Carl what he could and could not have in his own house. He imagined Brian putting his hairy arm around her, coaxing her into agreement. He thought of the tattoo of a cartoonish guitar and musical note on his hairy shoulder, and Sandy nestling her head on that shoulder, and he thought he was going to be sick. Brian was seven years older than Sandy, and that faded tattoo, glaringly present at family trips to the shore, seemed to Carl an emblem of a life of seediness in its most unsophisticated form, lived in dive bars with women with big hair and long nails and men with half unbuttoned Hawaiian shirts while Sandy was still in braces.

But the thought of resisting exhausted him, the same way he never had the energy to resist Diane, who had such strong opinions about things that seemed so inconsequential. Like the way he folded the bathmat and hung it over the side of the bathtub, or the kind of cottage cheese he brought home from the supermarket. He let her reprimand him and swallowed any resistance. He was too old and too tired to make a big thing of it.

“Brian says it’s the first thing you learn nowadays—you don’t bring a child into a home with a gun in it. You think they won’t find them, but they will. Especially toddlers like Tommy. You know how he gets into everything. Brian says three children die every year due to accidents with their parents’ guns. You hear about it on the news all the time, Dad.”

Carl wanted to say that three a year didn’t really seem like that much if you thought about it, and that he wondered about the validity of figures like that in the first place. But before he could, she said, all in one breath, the way she would say things as a girl that she

knew would get her in trouble: “Brian says we can’t bring Tommy over with a gun in the house. That’s not worth a dumb antique, is it?”

Carl said, “Damn it, Sandy! I said I’d do it, didn’t I? You and your mother. What are we still talking about this for?” But what he really wanted to do was throw the phone across the room. He wanted to give Sandy one of those looks that used to make her snap into reverent fear when she was still living under his roof. But alone, in his empty house, all he could do was slam his fist down on the glass coffee table that Diane had always treated as if it would break if someone were to exhale on it, making the glass bowls of caramel candies rattle. Did this moron, this nobody from South Jersey with little more than a secretary position at some no-name insurance company, think he could threaten Carl?

“No,” said Carl to Sandy. “It’s not worth it.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” Sandy said again. “Thanks for understanding.”

Carl hung up the phone and looked down at his hand still clenched and poised on the table next to the dusty pile of magazines and photo albums, his skin, thin and papery, pulled taut against the knuckles and veins, his fingernails pressing into the flesh of his palm.

Although Carl missed the coyote on the drive home that night, what Diane doesn’t know is that he has seen several coyotes lurking in his backyard at night when he sits on the deck with a drink and, occasionally, a cigarette. For all these years, ever since his wife tried to make him quit when Sandy was born, he has been a clandestine smoker, at first sneaking one in while walking the dog or taking the garbage out. Diane must have noticed the smell, but she never said anything as long as he kept it out of sight. But now that Sandy is grown and Diane’s sleep has only gotten heavier, there are more opportunities. He and Diane used to go to bed at the same time every night, and he would lie there for an hour at least, pretending to

sleep. But a few years ago he stopped following her nine p.m. ascent from the living room up to the bedroom, and to his surprise, she never said anything about it. He soon began to stay up for several hours after her, eventually realizing he only needed to be beside her when she woke up in the morning.

When this rebellion lost its novelty, he began drinking alone—things Diane would never drink with him, like whiskey and gin and dark beer. He soon realized he could fall into bed stinking of booze and cigarettes and she would only respond with a short grunt in her sleep. At night, alone on the deck, he would take long drags and watch the smoke rise in serpentine patterns illuminated by the light of his industrial lantern. There was something thrilling about looking out onto the manicured lawn—Diane’s perfectly spherical hydrangea bushes, the boxed herbs that lined the railing—through a screen of smoke. He would hold it loosely between his fingers, relax his eyes so the lit end made trails in the darkness, and this conjured up memories of being twelve years old and smoking Virginia Slims stolen from his mother with other boys at night in the backyard, of the exhilaration of doing something forbidden and the longing to make it seem natural and ordinary; they would practice holding it in certain ways, try desperately to fully inhale and exhale without coughing or wincing, tell each other they couldn’t go back to school in September without being able to blow smoke through their nostrils. At the same time he remembers talking to friends in smoky bars as a young man, making huge gesticulations with his hands, his cigarette burning closer and closer to his knuckles, seeming but never really being unaware of it, dancing with girls and resting his hand, the lit cigarette still balanced precariously between his fingers, on the bare, smooth skin of their shoulders.

He was not unaccustomed to the howling at night—the hollow moaning and short, woeful yips that made him feel like he lived in the desert. The local paper attributed the rise in sightings in northwestern New Jersey and Pennsylvania to the destruction of their natural habitat in the state parks. “They’re extremely adaptable

animals,” Carl remembers his neighbor, Ron McPherson, telling him. He was another guy who smoked behind his wife’s back, or at least Carl assumed it was behind her back. Sometimes Carl would wander out into the front yard, hoping to see him standing on the corner down the block from his house, surrounded by a cloud of smoke turned green from the streetlight like a scene from a movie. Ron was a short, stout man with a belly that hung shamelessly over his trousers, an unruly beard, and crooked, stained teeth. Somehow these qualities made him seem savagely intimidating, as if he were not a financial planner but a mountain man who lived on a diet of freshly killed meat.

“They’re like cockroaches,” he had told Carl. “They can live anywhere, survive off anything. They’ll eat up your trash, your garden, even your puppy or kitten, greedy little fuckers.” Carl always wondered if Ron spoke this way only during these secret smoking breaks or if the McPhersons were the kind of family that didn’t flinch when someone cursed at the dinner table.

“It’s their tails that get me the most,” Carl had said. “The way they stick straight out behind them. That’s how you can tell one from a dog at a distance—their tails.” He paused and waited for Ron to say something. Ron didn’t. “I don’t know why,” Carl then said. “It just gets me. It’s obscene.”

At this, Ron smiled, let out one *heh* and Carl felt relieved.

Alone on his deck at night, he would think of Ron’s gravelly voice, his sharp exhalations of smoke as the consonants of his words escaped from under his wiry mustache. Carl would hear rustling in the grass on nights like this and look up from his book into the darkness, made even more opaque by the fluorescent light of his lantern. When it first started happening, he would just sit perfectly still until it seemed they had retreated. But lately, he would jump to his feet and grab the flashlight they kept on a hook next to the screen door. He would descend two, maybe three steps down from the deck, the arm that held the flashlight extended, poised like a fencer. Carl would stay still for a long time and allow them to get closer, now and

then taking a brazen step into a patch of light, revealing their bony torsos, or the muddy beards of fur that hung below their necks. He would look out into his empty yard and the woods beyond it and hiss in his loudest whisper so as not to wake the neighbors, *You stay away from my property, you rotten scavengers! I don't have a thing for you.* Once the Giordanos' light went on, and Carl quickly turned off his lantern, grabbed his book and glass, and rushed inside. After all, he didn't need Fran Giordano, who didn't have anything better to think about, asking why he was always sitting out on his porch so late at night, or even mentioning it to Sandy the next time she came over. That was the last thing he needed.

Carl takes a sharp breath in and the coyote freezes for what could be a few minutes or an hour. Carl blinks at the shadowy yet unmistakable mass frozen at the foot of his bed. He stays just as still and quiet, until finally the coyote begins to move. He thinks, *This is it. The backyard wasn't enough for you. You think you can just march into my home like you own the place, into my bedroom of all places, while my wife is sleeping.* Carl looks over and sees Diane fast asleep on her stomach, her nose pressed to the side of her face against the pillow, and looks again at the animal at the foot of his bed. He says out loud, *You're a wild, disgusting animal and there's no place for you here.*

The coyote turns to him and says, "You talking in your sleep, old man?"

Carl is unable to speak but lets out an audible gasp. The coyote looks like it is rearing back on its hind legs, rising until it is standing upright, and now Carl can see that it is not a coyote at all, but a man that stands before him. He sees this and the fear doesn't come from the thing itself but from his distrust in his own vision: He had been so, so certain. After all, there have been many nights when he has awoken suddenly, reaching for something that had only moments ago seemed so vivid and concrete, but in waking, alone in the darkness, had ceased

to exist. Why should this be any different? Paralyzed and alone, he has no choice but to resign to the assumption that he is dreaming again, to doubt the existence of the impending danger. He lies back down until the sound of his heart beating inside his skull subsides. No, he decides. He has not just seen a strange man standing in his bedroom. He's been wrong so many times before. Carl closes his eyes and waits for sleep to return.

Dreaming, Carl is in the hospital with Bernard, and he knows the surgery has already happened. An elaborate network of tubes pumps blood and air in and out of his father through loops and funnels, like something out of a chemist's laboratory. In the center of his shaven chest is a thinly bandaged incision still wet with blood: a lightning bolt carved into his sternum. There is the distant chatter of women's voices, which Carl knows must belong to his wife and daughter, though no words are distinguishable. Somewhere a television buzzes and blankets the room in pulsing blue light.

Then there is his father's hand, a sudden weight on Carl's arm. Carl looks over and his father is awake, pulling Carl's face close to his. His face is still clean-shaven but the hair on his neck has grown long and wiry, framing his face like the mane of an animal. Carl notices his eyes, wide and glistening; Carl can't tell if this is meant to express pleading or anger, and both terrify him equally.

"Carl." As his father begins to speak, Carl can see that he doesn't have his dentures in. The corners of his mouth sag loosely into a frown as he forms the words with his lips. "Carl, I told you I shouldn't have gone through with it. Now look at me." Carl tries to answer but can't; static and the murmur of women's voices fill his throat like water.

Carl is awakened by another hand, grabbing his shoulder and pressing its fingers into his flesh. He opens his eyes to darkness and the sound of weeping.

“Carl, wake up. Oh Carl. For the love of God.”

He turns to see the terror in Diane’s face, which, bathed in moonlight, is all shadows and prominences. The glistening whites of her tear-soaked eyes inspire a wave of love and pity and regret that tugs at his groggy heart, and he puts a hand to her wet cheek. Her unbrushed hair and reddened face make her look strangely youthful.

“He’s in here Carl, oh God,” she hisses. “He’s in here.”

Carl turns to see a black mass, the coyote turned man, hunched over the dresser in the corner, taking tools that clink in his hand and glimmer in the darkness to the safe in the bottom cabinet.

“Hurry hurry hurry Carl!” is all his wife can say. He can see the man kick away some laundry in his path, his muddy boot on his wife’s underthings. He sees his worn leather wallet, empty on the floor like a deflated carcass. Without getting up, Carl reaches into the top drawer of his bedside table, fumbles past old balled up tissues and tubes of various kinds of medicated creams until he feels the angular metal of his father’s pistol, hears it scratch against the wood of the drawer as he pulls it into his grasp. No, he had not gotten rid of it as his daughter requested. It had been there all along. And yes, it had always been loaded, all through Sandy’s childhood. Nobody had touched it since Bernard’s brother Phil got ahold of it when he was drunk and shot the Petersons’ cat back in 1983.

And now it is at the end of Carl’s firmly extended arm, the trigger beneath his sweaty finger. He has gotten up, been moving silently in the shadows, and the man has remained hunched in the corner, working at the safe.

Carl tries to speak but only inhales sharply, and the man drops his tools and rises slowly to his feet. When he turns around, Carl sees no fear in the man’s shadowy face. Just the glint of his teeth, and his belt buckle, the shape of his hair: ratty and long past his shoulders.

The man grabs Carl’s wrist, circles his hand around the bone, twists it suddenly, moves his hand through his palm almost as if they were doing some kind of elaborate handshake. And then Carl’s hand

is empty, his clammy fingers still twisted into the same helpless shape, the object they gripped no longer there.

He is looking into the barrel of his father's Webley, the muzzle a hexagon of darkness before him.

Carl's wife can only scream, "Oh, let him go! Please please please! Let him go!"

Let who go? Who should let who go? Carl wants to know.

"Don't be stupid, old man," the intruder says. "I'll kill you." His voice is surprisingly flat and casual, no trace of gruffness or accent.

Carl believes him. The man gestures toward the bed with the gun, and Carl steps back until the edge of the bed hits him at the backs of his knees and he melts into his wife's arms, which lock firmly around his trembling body.

And then it's over. The man leaves. Beneath the flesh of Diane's arm Carl catches one last glimpse of the lower half of him: his pockets bulging with cash and jewelry, his father's gun tucked into the waist of his pants.

As soon as he's gone, Diane relaxes into a torrent of tears and they hold each other, watching through the bedroom window as the man darts across the lawn and out of his vision as the light turns from grey to pink and like clockwork, the birds under the air conditioner start their flapping.

"Come, stay with us," Sandy had pleaded, "at least until the police get this sorted out."

"Yeah, you don't want to mess with these guys," Brian had added. "He could come back if he thinks you're an easy target. They do that. As if you were his piggy bank. Disgusting." He said this while shaking his head and looking down, putting one hand on his hip.

But Carl was immovable, even to the pleas of his wife, who finally went to stay with her daughter, begging him to follow when he'd gotten his head straight. "He's still in shock," she explained to everyone.

Now, in the empty house, Carl sits on the back porch with a coffee mug half full of whiskey. *They will have gone to bed by now*, he thinks. *They were expecting me by dinner and now they will have given up*. He exhales smoke into the fluorescent lamp and looks out into the darkness.

"I'm not leaving my own goddamn house," he had told them, the suddenness of his elevated temper startling Sandy, who looked at him not with the fear he could once so easily evoke, but with pity. Like parents look at their children when their concerns are things children couldn't possibly understand.

"Daddy, it's just for the night. Shouldn't you be with your family at a time like this? Wouldn't you feel safer?"

It doesn't matter, Carl thinks now. *I hope he does come back*.

He grabs the flashlight from its hook and moves from the chair to the porch steps. He sits there, shining it out onto the lawn, moving it in quick figure eights, illuminating flashes of grass and Tommy's swing set and the trees, their branches heavy and lush in the late August humidity.

Then he sees shifting in the hydrangea bush; he hears snorting and pawing at dirt. And then stillness, the two reflective eyes hovering in the darkness.

Carl turns the flashlight off and steps out onto the grass.

