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## The Castle

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## THE CASTLE

For the third time this month, we are awakened by cannon fire. The dog barks, and I can hear him clattering on the linoleum in the kitchen, scrabbling after a sound deafening, everywhere, and then gone. Carla hasn't stirred. But that, she tells me, is because she is not sleeping.

"I was almost expecting it tonight," she says.

"Why?"

She cracks all the fingers on one hand and then says, "Don't know. I just was."

She sits up and flings her legs over the bed. One move, athletic. Everything she does is a dismount, and I'm almost always still amazed by it.

"Do you want me to go?" I ask.

"No, Hal. Don't be ridiculous," she says. Then she thrusts out her boobs. "He'll listen to me."

What should be a playful line is instead grim, business-like. I stand and look out the window. I can't see him along the battlements facing us, nor do any of the turrets on our side show any light. Atop a lone brazier on the spire above the keep, last logs smolder, and a few pennants snap and then curl down along their standards. There's not even any smoke; last time, the smoke lingered near our house, filled everything with its smell, even my car, secured in a garage on the side away from the castle, but not tonight.

"I don't see him," I say.

"He'll come out. I'll stand on the damned drawbridge and scream til he shows himself, if I have to—but he'll come out."

And so she goes, yoga pants, sports bra, her only weapon her considerable will.

After a moment, I follow her.

I pet Snook for a minute, give him a thorough and calming head scratch, trying to calm myself. And then, even though I know better, I look for a weapon. Carla's tennis rackets seem all wrong, so

I grab a ten-pound bright green dumbbell, which only seems right until I'm outside, hanging back in the shadows, with a dumbbell in my hand, watching my wife sidle up to a castle.

"Show yourself!" she yells. I doubt she'd see him if he did. The castle walls are about thirty feet high, and the only windows in front are over the portcullis and the murder holes, where there is neither light nor movement.

"You fuckhead—come out!"

Across the street, the Davies' light turns on. I step farther back, out of its cast, behind the minivan.

"NOW. Come out NOW."

Then out into the light from his house steps Glenn himself, long and loping, looking even scrawnier than usual in a shabby terry robe. He lights a cigarette, sees me, and it's too late to hide.

"She after him about the cannon?" Glenn's one of those guys who looks away when he talks to you.

"Yeah. Did you guys hear it?"

"Oh yeah, we heard it," he says. After a drag, he adds, "Sheila nearly pissed the bed." He laughs, all smoke and hiss.

As I imagine him stripping sheets and cursing, I hear the clanging and squeak of the portcullis rising, and there's Reg, in Bermudas and a KISS t-shirt, big dumb grin on his face and his moustache tips waxed pin-straight, sticking out to either side of his fat face.

To Carla, he says, "What bothereth thou? Thee? Whatever?"

Even from here, I can see his eyes are glued to Carla's boobs.

"The fucking cannon. You know, once? Funny. Twice? Okay, a new toy. Three times? All in the middle of the night?"

He drops the smile, crosses his arms. He becomes the quintessential Nerd, Cornered. "Sue me. I keep my hours."

Carla jabs her finger at his face, and starts into a rant we have all wanted to deliver, about how we'd love to sue him, love to do anything to turn all this back, but that we wanted to try the neighborly thing first, however much he didn't deserve it, however much he abused the privilege of his wealth, and on and on. Glenn and I watch her, and Glenn grunts every now and again, and I

grip the dumbbell, even curl it a few times. My adrenaline flashes through me to the point where I feel sick and twitchy, but Carla and I have been through this. I am to let her work. That's how it's done. Let her work, keep my mouth shut, keep out of the way, keep out of trouble. And while it isn't exactly new to me anymore, it has not gotten much easier.

Reg knows how to goad us. We had tried to sue him, had wanted to very badly. When the neighborhood first got wind of the plans to put a castle at the end of the cul-de-sac, we explored our legal options. The township stepped in that time and made sure the neighborhood kids at least would not have to worry about a moat. My paper covered the controversy, and I got the scoop on what happened in town meetings from the other reporters. We had no ordinances or statutes that anticipated Reg, that fit his situation, and his lawyer was very good at pointing that out repeatedly, something we knew Reg paid him well to do.

In the end, there would still be a castle. And to his credit, following the little township showdown, he was actually pretty great for a long time. He paid the contractors extra to ensure that they kept the dust down not only during excavation, but also as they cut and placed the stones that, over the course of a summer and fall, built the massive walls surrounding the keep. At various points of the construction, he invited the neighborhood to tour the site, to ask questions, and he was pretty good natured with his answers.

He even hosted the block party for two years, as the finishing touches were put on the place. The second time, he told us to bring any old appliances, ratty furniture, ugly clothes, and old luggage, and everybody was pretty jolly when he let us load up the catapult a few times and fire everyone's junk into the power company right-of-way. I even took the ribbing of people who said it would be funny to fire my old Mustang off the roof of the castle. Reg was even gracious in coming to my defense, pointing out that we would never get it to the roof. Still, the size of things we did

fling was noteworthy. We cleaned the mess up later, but the linemen had to wonder about the huge divots made by (respectively) a washing machine, an old hide-a-bed, a chest freezer, and a flake-board computer table from the eighties.

Of course, he might have wanted to play nice while his defenses still had clear weak points. But then, what did he worry about? We weren't Mongol hordes, we were not Tamerlane taking a Moor army into his empire. We were neighbors. We drove minivans. We fished the daily papers out of our hedges. We scooped our pets' poop. We stopped watering our lawns when the township told us to (except for the occasional scofflaw who watered at night). Still, looking back, his attitude changed once the ironworkers got the portcullis going. It clanged into place, and Reg started growing that silly moustache.

And now, the cannon has us all on edge. The cannon feels like he's testing us, grandstanding, proclaiming how his windfall has put him above the law, and above all of us. It makes us angry at little things. We mow the lawn and have to look at it. In fact, I have to make sure I mow my lawn in the morning, before the sun shifts and the entire side yard is in shadow and I can't see whether the mower is cutting everything or not. Glenn and Sheila Davies can't hang laundry out anymore, because the castle either blocks the wind or makes the wind tear around it so powerfully that all the clothes are blown onto the lawn in minutes. When snow falls off the turrets or the battlements, it's a thirty foot drop before it makes an earth-shaking whump. Mothers of old would have had a field day warning children of the icicles that hung off of the damned thing.

In fact, all of us in the neighborhood are peeved that every kid in the subdivision comes to our cul-de-sac (you can't blame them, if you were a kid, and there were a freaking castle in your neighborhood, where would you be?), and they stay there, and they make noise, and they also make us all feel responsible for them, and so we worry. And every time I walk into Vernon's for coffee, I hate how I see Reg's face, big smug grin, and him holding up that big fake check, his name printed in huge script by someone probably paid a few hundred dollars to do it, and some guy in a tie grinning at us,

telling us all to play Powerball at Vernon's, cause you just never know!

Well, as Carla says when she sees it, "Now we know. And it sucks."

Reg backs away as Carla continues, until he is just inside the arch, standing a few feet in from the drawbridge. He pulls a remote out of his pocket and the portcullis starts descending.

Carla stops, then says, "Oh, real mature. Just close the door and hide in your big fucking castle. This isn't the end."

"Oh," Reg says. "I believeth it is."

Glenn looks at me as if to say you just gonna let him do that to your wife? The dumbbell gets heavier.

"If I went over there, Glenn—" I start, and then I stop. He is looking away again, and it is clear he won't push me about it.

Reg is gone. I imagine him returning to some tower to flop in front of the X-box. On the rare occasions he speaks to any of us, the X-box is overwhelmingly the subject. I've never even seen an X-box, much less held a control. But that never stops him. He just goes on and on.

Carla strides back across the dust patch that constitutes Reg's front lawn.

Glenn says, "What are you going to do? What are we going to do? He can't just keep firing off that goddamned cannon."

Carla is close enough that she hears him.

"We'll call the cops again. It's a noise thing. They gotta respond."

"It's like dogs," Glenn says without irony. "There has to be ten-minutes or more of sustained noise, and they gotta come while it's happening." Glenn knows this because we got to know him, a few years ago, when he called them because Snook, then a rambunctious puppy from the SPCA, had barked quite a bit until we had him trained.

"Maybe they can be creative, since it's a firearm and it's one in the morning."

"I doubt it," I say. "I don't think we're going to find the answer by going through the local cops."

Carla's lips tighten before she says, "There are avenues, and we need to exhaust them."

"Whatever. Knock yourself out," I say, and immediately regret it.

Then Glenn says, "Use my name, too. In fact, I can call after you do, if you want."

They keep strategizing, but I don't really hear what they are saying. I have moved the dumbbell behind my back, and am waiting until I can walk to the house. We are about to have a fight. And neither of us will get much sleep tonight.

Carla hangs up with the police and calls Glenn. As she speaks with Glenn, she does not once look in my direction. I putter through the kitchen, putting dry dishes away, hanging tea towels to dry. When Carla finishes with Glenn, she puts down the phone and straightens.

"Thanks for all your help," she says.

"Look—"

"No, really. Thanks for, you know, making this all a little easier. And the dumbbell. Nice touch. What exactly were you going to do with that?"

"Bad idea," I say. "Old habits die hard."

She steps closer to me, the look on her face a mix of affection and weariness. "You have to make them die or we're screwed. You have to accept it. When shit like this happens now, I have to deal with it. You can be around, you can help me in all kinds of different ways, but when there is someone to be dealt with directly, I will do it."

"I know that."

"I know you do, but it doesn't help when you don't act like you do."

"I stood back. I waited. I did the whole happy eunuch thing. I celebrated my powerlessness."

"Yeah, you did. But then you were a complete bitch when I got back. And now you have this attitude. I mean, I know you're not happy with it, but that's the way it is. That's the way you made it."

"I didn't make this," I say. "I didn't make it like this. I am

just fed up with the shit, have been for a long time—”

“And I’m not? Come on, you know better. Tell me you know better.”

After a moment, I said, “It just gets to me.”

“Always has,” she said. I think she is turning conciliatory, I think this might be going down, and then she says, “You have to let it go you know, let me handle things. You know this, but then you got pissy, you acted like I was ineffective, like I had no sense of how to go about this—”

“Aw, c’mon. You know as well as I do that the cops are useless with this.”

“Yeah, I do, but we can’t just come in swinging either.”

Neither of us talk. I am shaking and ashamed and too angry and volatile to say anything, and I don’t know what I would say anyway. She holds my gaze for a moment, no doubt containing any of a number of further remarks herself, before she breaks and goes to the fridge. At the pop of the fridge door gasket, Snook rises and scrabbles into the kitchen. Carla feeds him cheese when I am not around, and thinks I don’t know about it. I settle when I see her hand reach from behind the fridge door to find his head. Her fingers move through the fur. She reappears with a yogurt smoothie bottle in her hand.

“That poor dog is freaked,” I say.

“Your poor wife is freaked,” she says.

I nod.

“I need to know you are not going to flip out again,” she says.

I nod again. I feel like a bobblehead in these conversations.

She moves in then, to hug me maybe, but before she gets close enough, cannon fire thunders and her body stiffens.

“Call them again,” I say. “Call them now.”

As she starts to dial, I decide that it is almost one hundred percent that Reg will fire that cannon again.

Reg is the kind of guy that believes in reacting big, the kind of guy that in grade school, if you had punched him in the arm, he’d turn and kick you in the face, then a few times in the ribs if you fell



down. Then he might find a way to spit on your mom and tell you about it later, weeks after you'd forgotten the whole thing.

The first time we ever called the cops, and not even for anything terribly un-neighborly, Reg went ape shit. This was after the catapult-the-appliances party. He had lit a bunch of his braziers on the fourth of July, to light the place up. It was kind of nice, kind of cool. Kids drove down the street to see the way the battlements lit up. He even had torches going in some of the arrow slits, and a massive fire on top of the keep. It was a little smoky, but the high school was across the large flat fields, beyond the right-of-way behind our subdivision, and since they shot off the fireworks there, we could see them bursting over the top of the castle and all its fire and shadows. If it weren't for the water tower actually also being in view, it would have been almost like the fireworks at Cinderella's castle at Disneyland.

Reg had invited some of his buddies over. We never saw that he had buddies, but that is apparently what happened. They drank Jaegermeister and played X-box out on the balcony at the back end of the keep, all while watching the fireworks, until Reg, in a drunken tirade, threw them all out. He passed out not long afterward—and did not douse any of the braziers. It had been a dry July. Some torches burned down and started to drop stuff. Little grass fires were starting at the base of his towers.

I think Glenn actually called the cops. But we were all outside when they came, and Carla and I were unspooling garden hose to have at some of the blazes. There were too many for just us, though.

Reg woke to sirens, the honk of a tanker truck, and a bull-horn calling him out of his inebriated sleep. He was fined. At one point, he shouted, "Thou shalt to fucking hell go! With you all! Shit!"

A cop said, "Calm down, Lancelot."

Shortly after that, Reg sprayed Round-Up on all the lawn on his property. By the end of August, bare, hard tan dirt was all that was left. He hung a sign from his tallest tower that said, "Dirt doth not burn, thou assholes." It looked like he painted it on a bed-sheet. It had drips and smears all through it. Then, for a few weeks, our newspapers disappeared from our stoops and driveways, and

at the end of the string of newspaper thefts, Reg built a towering bonfire atop the brazier over the keep, fueled by our newspapers, burning at the height of the hot, dry August, all night long.

Carla marches out into the front yard while I get the ladder from the garage. We have had An Idea. Glenn's thing about the noise ordinance got me thinking about proving that a noise was made, and then that a firearm was discharged, and it hit me. A cannon will flash. When I used to talk with vets about the horror of the battlefield, or when I read different historical accounts, there was always the flash, the fire, whatever. Always light and smoke, the telltale signs. And so I climb to the roof with a digital video recorder. The roof because it is the only way I can see over the wall of Reg's castle, and the video camera because there is no way I can time a regular camera to catch a shot. I have two hours of battery, a big roll of duct tape, and the conviction of a husband on the outs with his wife and looking to make good. I cannot lose.

I tape the camera to the chimney, and then sight it and adjust the lens. I find the cannon, sitting on the balcony at the rear of the keep. I focus to take in as much of the area in front of the cannon as I can. Then, I start wrapping duct tape around the camera, making a wide gray asterisk on the side of my chimney. Once I think it's basically secure, I wrap long bands all around the chimney several times, covering the asterisk, reinforcing the camera. I check the lens, and with all set to go, I hit REC and sit back, perched on the rough crown of the roof, feeling the shingles abrasive through my shorts.

Carla is down below, and Glenn has joined her. I can hear them talking, but not what they're saying. He is dressed now, his hands clasped behind his back, his head angled toward Carla, his feet shoulder width apart. He has the pleasure of waiting down there next to my wife. His own wife is inside, sleeping.

Fatigue hits me. I have not been tired during all of this, and then it is like all the tired feelings that I should have felt converge at once and my body is a stone. The low whir of the camera and the muttering between Glenn and Carla are all I can hear, and it is putting me to sleep. Then, the cannon goes off again. Jolted awake, I scramble over to the camera and press stop, the booming

echoing around the neighborhood. From the roof, I can see one or two lights go on in the neighborhood.

I hit REV, then view the last few seconds of tape in the little view finder window. It's there, a bright white flash that grows to fill the screen, driving the light sensor mad, before it dissipates in a grainy swirl of darkness. And the camera provides a bonus I hadn't thought of: the boom is caught as well, sounding tinny and distorted in the camera's miniaturized world. I tear the camera out of the duct tape.

"Carla! We got it," I holler, and when I turn to give her a thumbs-up, a ridiculous, juvenile move, my foot slips on the roof. For a second, I know everything that will follow, the slide, the mad grapple at the gutter, her and Glenn running toward the house. And then I am falling.

A few months after Reg started construction on the castle, I got laid off. The paper for which I had worked as a reporter, features writer, and eventually columnist for almost a decade was purchased and the staff shaved down basically to ad staff, a few of the younger (and thus less expensive) reporters, and someone to edit the copy from the wire services. I was given hours to leave the building, as were most of the other people in the newsroom. Just about everybody decided to go tie one on and consider their options, but I drove out to try and find Carla.

It was a Thursday, and it was June, so it meant she was working with individuals all day long, hour-long clinics during which members worked on their serve, their backhand, their coverage of the net. I seldom watched Carla at work, but looked forward to any opportunity to do so. Her body was long, but the control she had over it and the strength she could tease out of it made watching her engaging. I would find myself tensing, or feeling breathless—not out of desire. Just out of awe at her physical capability.

I ran, ate well generally, and stayed in shape, but it wasn't my job. My job was to sit and write, try not to overthink it. Try to make it clear. But mostly to sit. I would go and sit in bus stations, in courtrooms, in waiting rooms, in banks, in school au-

ditoriums. I would listen to people in far less control and grow impatient at their inability to string together even simple words to get across what they meant. And I would grow especially impatient when two people would talk at one another, stopping only when they ran out of ideas or the other person shouted them down, and rather than listen, they would prepare their next tirade. And so often, they just said the same thing but didn't hear it.

Carla had eloquence in movement. She could take control of a person's body with a touch here or a word there, and they would do it. I mentioned this to her once, and she said, "Everyone thinks they can speak. No one thinks they can just play tennis." She didn't elaborate.

I drove down the club's shaded drive, in a car that, anymore, had to be coaxed into movement, that had a guttural and reluctant growl from its engine, and that smelled as though constantly burning somewhere. In this noisy offender, I drove under sycamores planted by someone so noteworthy that each end of the drive had a plaque describing the achievement. On the tennis court, a half dozen women the same age as Carla gathered around her, all in yoga pants and pony tails, all trim and aggressive about their fitness. She was busy, and I suddenly didn't know what I would say. I hadn't slept much the night before, working to meet a deadline for a column, and had opted not to shave that morning in order to spend a little extra time in bed. I had spilled coffee in my lap. I drove the automotive equivalent of a derelict with a nasty cold. In short, I came off like Falstaff or some angry hobo come to molest the rich women, and that made me suddenly feel like an angry hobo.

Driving home, I calculated what they were paying the club, what the club paid my wife, how little we had in savings, what our monthly needs were, and the numbers got bad. As these numbers formed taunting columns in my imagination, I arrived home to the now familiar cloud of dust moving in a lazy swirl about the cul de sac. It fit: as the jobless angry hobo back from soiling the lawn of the country club, I was now arriving in the fiefdom where the local lord's construction covered the peasants in a dust made more pricey for the cost of the labor to produce it.

His contractors had started a little garbage pile—stone

chips, empty mortar bags, scrap wood, coffee cups—the edge of which now pushed onto my lawn. I knew before going in the house that everything would be coated in a tallow-gray film, the stone dust having worked in through every less-than-perfect seal in the house. We dusted every night, and every afternoon the stone masons worked, we saw the return of the dust. I walked inside, unsure of what I would do for the rest of the day, and too angry to remain outside, where I would simply cough and hack and make it worse anyway.

The dust: I blew it out of the computer keyboard. When I pet Snook, the stuff puffed out from his fur. I ate a pear and tasted it. I ate a few cookies and tasted it again. I swore I could even taste in the water. The lawn was grey, the house, once yellow, was now more brown. The kids who came to watch the construction also liked to write things in the dust coating windows of the garage doors, a double insult. That morning, I noticed, they wrote, for some reason, and what any other day would be nonsensical, GET A JOB. And while in the middle of trying to salvage the day by making a sandwich, I answered a knock at the door to discover the guy who reads the water meter taking the time to tell me that, due to build up of debris that worked into the meter housing, the reader would have to be replaced. The township would cover the meter and so forth, but there would be a charge for the installation itself. I tersely dismissed him, despite his assertion that he was just letting me know.

I ate the sandwich. I watched *The Kids in the Hall* and didn't laugh once. I didn't even finish the sandwich. And then I felt bad because it was a waste of money to eat part of a sandwich and feed the rest to the dog, who got way too much food from me anyway. Despite the sandwich, despite my mood, I was determined to simply sit and watch TV, to wallow in distraction, to let a few hours pass before I did anything dumb. But I looked out the window. I should have known that would be bad to do. The world was out there, Reg was out there, there were things out there beyond my control, beyond the influence of a remote control—things that would not rest just because I so desperately thought I should.

I recognized the car parked in the cul de sac, a little Geo

sport jeep thing covered in anti-Bush stickers and a Parrothead decal: Brent, the guy who covered human interest stuff for the Lifestyle section. He enjoyed stories about plucky residents of nursing homes and rotund women who baked for craft fairs. He liked snappy leads.

It took me a minute to realize he wasn't coming to offer me some consolation. He had come to write about Reg.

At first, it is nearly impossible to draw a full breath, and my arms tingle. I try to draw in, and while I want to thrash to get unstuck, I can't move. I am next to the driveway, having bounced off the hood of the Mustang. While the car probably kept me from breaking any bones, the impact also knocked the wind out of me and seriously strained parts of my skeleton, I'm sure.

Carla keeps stroking my head, asking if I am okay, and when I can finally draw a full breath, I tell her to stop.

"What should we do?" she says.

I try to sit up, but my vision swims as I do, so I lay back down. Glenn says, "Woah, buddy."

"Find the camera. Can you find the camera?"

They both start in on variations of *Jesus, Hal, you just fell. For Christ's sake.*

"I know that," I say. "Just find the goddamn camera so the fall will be worth it."

Glenn looks meaningfully at Carla, and then goes off in search of the camera.

"He called 911," she says.

"That's no good without the evidence, so maybe you should help him."

"For you, dumbass," she says. "He called so they would send an ambulance."

I laugh and it hurts.

Carla sits with me as I concentrate simply on breathing. First things first. She asks again if she can help but I tell her it doesn't feel like she can do anything. Then Glenn hollers that he found the camera. It landed in the shrubs, and those scraggly things

must have helped break its fall, because it is intact, and still on.

"That camera and the evidence does not make it worth it that you fell off the roof, you know," Carla says. "This is a problem."

"It's all a problem," I say, grunting. "Our lives are about problems. Problems are what we do—what we've been doing for a while. This just rounds things out nicely."

After a moment she says, "I think it's very sad that you feel that way."

Then, the neighborhood is rocked once again by cannon fire.

I jolt from the sound, and it hurts—but since I am already in pain, I wrench myself up, so I am sitting. The world keels to the side, but then rights itself, as a monster headache blooms fully behind my eyes. The pain shudders in waves, so much that I grow instantly nauseous. Carla wipes at her eyes, and Glenn is moving toward us, his face is illuminated by the LED screen on the side of the video camera.

"We have him, buddy," he says. "I hope he enjoys firing that thing now, because pretty soon he's gonna be paying for it."

Carla says to me, "Do you really think our lives are problems?"

"It's really not the best time to ask me that."

Glenn yells to the castle, "I called the cops, Reg! The cops are ON. THEIR. WAY. REG."

I think I hear Reg yell back, *fucketh you!* Then I wonder if I am imagining it. I say to Carla, "Let's just get through this now, okay?"

I never did read the story Brent wrote about Reg, though I could imagine it. Particularly the part where he wrote about the psychotic neighbors living in the shadow of the castle who opposed the rugged individualist's bold outlook on suburban living. That was just the kind of asshole philosophy that cornpone-prone Brent just lived for.

I did give him some ammo for the psychotic thing. When I realized what Brent had come to do, I ran out into the front yard and found him snapping photos of the portcullis. Reg was nowhere in sight. I cannot now remember what I said to him, but it made

him spin around fast. It was already very clear from the newsroom that he and I were never to be buds, but I knew he then understood a whole other level of hostility was being directed at him.

I told him to go away. I said he was just encouraging someone who didn't give a shit about any of his neighbors. I told him that when people were losing their jobs, writing about some jackass who built a castle because of a lucky lottery ticket was, and I actually said this, actually remember uttering the words, "the zenith of tacky, the apogee of poor taste," as if attacking a guy like Brent with fancy words was going to do anything.

"You know, let it go," he said, holding up a hand and pushing it at me. "I'm sorry for you that things turned out how they did, but dude, I am just here to do a job."

"You can't just write about him. He is ruining this neighborhood, he is a slob, he is human fucking garbage that happened to get lucky."

Brent rolled his eyes and positioned himself for photographs.

"Well, if you're gonna take pictures, at least get a few good shots of the fucking gate, so people can know where to knock on the door for tours. Or where to drive through the fucking thing."

He just said, "Whatever," and started snapping randomly.

I stood there, waiting for him to say something else. I couldn't understand why he wasn't in the argument. I remember telling the shrink how the rest of the world fell away, how I didn't notice anything else, became focused on Brent. The court shenanigans, such as they were, later revealed to me that there had actually been kids out on their bikes in the cul de sac, that a few workers had stopped to watch the crazy guy yell at the reporter, that I had in fact created a spectacle. That everyone had watched me go back to the house and knew that I was going to be back. And so I wondered for months, where was I? Why can I only remember him and me in that moment? Why did I get so lost?

I returned to the yard moments later. I walked up to Brent, gave him a little shove, and said, "Leave. You're not writing this story." He turned toward me and I poked him in the chest, hard enough that he had to step back. "I said leave, or I will smack your fucking brains out."



He stared at me still, and then I started punching him. Even when he fell, I punched him. Straddled him and punched him more. I don't remember when or why I stopped. I don't remember what he looked like when he left. I don't remember what I did in the moments afterward.

I later learned that when he ran to his Geo and drove off with a little spray of gravel, he only drove down the street a bit. Then he called the police, who swiftly came and booked me for assault, terroristic threats, all kinds of things.

An ambulance arrives and two paramedics step out. One of the paramedics is a woman with a curvy figure, and so she is suffering Glenn. He asks her if the cops are on the way, if she wants to see the tape, as he describes the history of Reg. She tries to support the guy she came with, who is now handling me and trying to determine whether or not I have a concussion. Carla is not saying much, but is looking pointedly at the man checking me, as if her force of will can make things better than they are.

They decide they need something else. He tells me to wait and looks at Carla as if to say, Make sure he doesn't attempt to rise and jog around the house.

"I don't fucking believe we are in this position," I say. "He had built that goddamned castle, without a care for anyone else, without a thought to what his actions have done, with no thought at all, really. He is a moron run by his immediate whims. A little self-control, a little forethought, and we wouldn't be here suffering because of him."

"I couldn't have said it better," she says. It takes me a moment before I realize she is not just talking about Reg.

"Yeah, well, fine. So then why is no one arresting his fat ass for it?"

"He simply violated a noise ordinance, that's all, you know. He's not out to get you. This is not some poetic moment."

My head throbs, and a new pain stabs in my side for me worry about.

Glenn tears himself away from the paramedics and walks

over to us. Snook has started to bark inside, aware of the noise and tumult outside. "I'll go see to him," he says.

"Where the hell are the cops," I say.

Carla sighs heavily. She's making an effort to hold back. If I hadn't just fallen off a roof, she might be less gentle. I am momentarily proud for having figured that out.

I hear the paramedics telling a dispatcher somewhere that, essentially, they have come upon a tempest in a teapot. I will be alright. I hear them say I could get up a walk right now if I weren't being coddled by my wife. Everybody seems to have an opinion on how I'm doing.

Reg's cannon crashes again and the sound echoes through the neighborhood.

Carla stands and peers toward the paramedics. All of them are turned toward the castle. Carla jogs off toward them. Glenn is helping Snook out the front door, holding the screen door so it won't hit him, and Snook's tail thwacks it three times before he is out in the yard. My keys dig into my side as I lean and hoist myself to my feet.

The world spins for a moment, then rights itself. The first step is wobbly, the second tentative, but after a few more, I am jogging in a light hobble, and then I am in the Mustang. It starts after only a little cough, and snickers as I back it up. I think I hear my name, but once I put it in gear and let the pistons flood with fuel, let the engine do what it so wants to do, I can't hear anything except the dirt of Reg's ersatz lawn kicked up and pummeling the back wheel wells, the rods shuddering against the uneven expanse.

The engine screams suddenly, as if the muffler took a hit and a hole has let the engine's real noise come out—louder than the cannon, louder than anyone who might be yelling to me, loud like applause. I wait, then, let the engine drown out everything else, and I wish I had a lance. That fat ass wants a castle? Let him fight a knight. Let him fight an invasion. I close my eyes, laugh at the image, then feel nausea wash over me, so I open them again. When I do, his castle is spangled in blue and red. During the reverie, the police arrived, their lights like heralds, their voices loud like the taunts of marauders, and when Reg arrives in the arch behind the

portcullis, awash in the flood lights of the cop cars, I am thrilled to see he is small and ridiculous, his moustache waxed tight as a psychopathic scribble on the face of a clown.

I turn off the car. I see Carla in the rearview, her face wet and red from the lights, her arms crossed. In a moment I will let her sit with me in the car, and I will try to get her to believe what I will say, that things will be okay. But I will need a moment myself to believe it, to absorb that in the next few minutes, Reg will get a fine. Maybe more. They might take away the cannon, as it is an unlicensed firearm—and as the thought occurs to me, I hear a cop say almost that somewhere behind me.

I'm parked at the edge of my lawn, at the edge of the few things left that make up my life, about to storm a castle, and I have stopped. I have actually stopped. I bet somewhere the damned dog is even laying down, not pissing on something. I can't wait to tell Carla how grand life can be sometimes.