

Terrance Jenkins was certain he heard the sound of a closing door. He just got here and had planned to work his way through the house from the bottom to the top, the idea being you didn't want to get trapped in the basement in case someone got home early. But he'd only broke through the basement window five minutes ago! His eyes searched hungrily through the darkness for his watch.

4:52 P.M.

Terrance shook his head in disgust. He'd cased this neighborhood for more than a week and chose this house in particular because the couple that lived here didn't have kids and never got home before seven o'clock at night. Of all the nights for them to be two hours early! It didn't mean that careful planning for a job was a waste of time, of course, only that it wasn't enough.

He stopped feeling sorry for himself long enough to slip quietly into the large storage closet built under the stairs leading down to the basement. Jesus, these people have a lot of shit, he thought, as he surveyed the clothes and books and sporting equipment, looking for a dress or a coat, something long enough to hide his long six foot, three inch frame.

For a moment, Terrance considered if this was the right thing to do. He could try to slip back out the window he crawled into, but getting up and out was going to be harder for a big guy like him than getting down and in. Besides, the noise of the effort might attract whoever it was upstairs, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Terrance knew from personal experience that if anyone got a good look at him, especially

up close so they could see his face, that was when he could do jail time. If they could ID him, they could find him.

He'd made that mistake three years ago and decided it would never happen again. He and some friends had carjacked an old white guy pulling out of a parking garage in Albany, but the man resisted and one of Terrence's friends roughed him up so bad he cracked the old man's skull in three places. After he recovered, he identified all of them in a line up.

It got him three months in Lentwood, a juvenile detention facility in the mid Hudson Valley down by Kingston, New York - and three more months of house arrest on top of that. The friend who beat up the old man was a minor, too, but he got in worse trouble, still doing adult time further upstate in one of the many prisons that had become the main industry of that part of New York. Wearing that electronic tether bracelet was more humiliating than being incarcerated, Terrance had decided. It made him feel like a dog.

He also drew two conclusions in all the time he had to think about why he got busted. First, when he got out, no more working with gangs. Terrance had managed to avoid officially joining a specific gang, but he had become friendly with guys in the Albany chapter of the Crips, the arch enemy of the Bloods. From a young age, Terrance recognized he was too independent a person to pledge allegiance to anyone but himself, but he also knew that staying neutral gave you better odds at not getting shot. Moreover, you didn't want to put your fortunes in someone else's hands, no matter who it was.

The second thing he learned from the experience was that he would go out of his way to do a job where the victims were far away – so no more muggings or carjackings or stuff like that. He didn't get off on hurting people, anyway. Just tryin' to make a living, he'd tell his friends

who pressured him to officially join the Albany Crips. He agreed to wear their symbol on a chain necklace he wore to show some solidarity, not something everyone in the gang thought he should do if he wasn't an official member. Still, the gang leaders hadn't objected, if they knew about it at all, and it seemed to appease his friends, anyway. It was small enough and tucked into his shirt most of the time, so Terrance went along with it.

Presently, Terrance understood that whoever it was upstairs, if they saw him, his options were limited. And he didn't want to think about what that meant right now.

He finally found a man's bathrobe hanging in the middle of a clothes rack, shook his head in disgust, and then reluctantly crouched into the furthest corner of the closet and draped the white terry cloth robe over his head and most of his body. He soon discovered, however, that no matter how he positioned himself, it wasn't long enough to cover his feet.

Terrance wanted desperately to look for something to cover them but, again, he was concerned about making any noise. He decided instead to stay still and try to think things through. Like a little boy playing hide and go seek, he pulled the robe back from his eyes enough to give him a view of the closet door. How often do people even go into a closet like this, he wondered? Hell, he didn't know. None of the apartments he had called home in Albany - only fifty miles across the state line, but worlds away - were even half as big as this basement. He'd never seen a storage closet until he started breaking into white people's homes. He bet that rich people like this, who had so much stuff they hid it in closets, didn't come looking for it very often. At least, he prayed they wouldn't just now.

Terrance could hear footsteps or the occasional banging noise upstairs. Whoever it was that came home was all over the place, but there was no indication they were coming down into the

basement. This momentary reprieve calmed his nerves, allowing him to review his options as he hid in the storage closet of a house he had intended to rob, crunched up like a little child sleeping underneath a stranger's robe.

He could try to crawl back up and out the basement window, but he had already ruled that out. He could make a run for it up the stairs and out the back door, making sure to pull the hood of his sweatshirt over his head to protect his identity, but that option was full of risk. What if the man kept a gun in the house or something? He could run after Terrance and get a good shot at him from behind. Terrance knew from all the other houses he'd broken into that white people owned a lot of damn guns. People were worried about the black man shooting them, but it was the white man who was armed to the teeth. Even if he did get away, he would have to run to his car, which thankfully he had yet to pull up the driveway. You always did that last, after you had piled up the goods at the door. That way, there was less time for any neighbors to notice a strange car in the driveway.

Although it was dark out and the car was stolen, if anyone saw him running to get into it and pull away, they'd call the cops and the law would be after him before he got out of the neighborhood. And even if that didn't happen, they would give a description of Terrance and the car, and that would be broadcast to other cops within minutes. Police all over the area would be looking for him in no time. A black man in any kind of car stands out in a rural area where mostly rich white people live, but especially when there's an APB on the airwaves.

The only other option Terrance could see was to stay right where he was hidden in this closet. It was a gamble for sure, because if whoever it was did open the closet and find him there, he would have to hurt them. On the other hand, if they did come down to the basement, they

probably wouldn't look in a closet that obviously contained things they didn't use much. He might actually be able to stay until they left and then finish the job. He'd have both a great story to tell his friends and a good haul to boot.

Just then, Terrance heard the basement door squeak and the sound of shoeless feet on the steps above him. He could feel the corners of his mouth droop down as his happy thoughts of how this might end vanished. Dammit, he thought, they're coming down, though he still couldn't tell if it was the man or the woman. For the first time, he panicked a bit and began desperately, if quietly, scattering some of the many ladies shoes on the floor around his own feet.

His head was bent down almost between his legs as he crouched under the robe with his elbows resting on his knees. He could feel his arms quivering. Terrance took a deep and slow breath, but it did nothing to calm his racing heartbeat, which he could feel now in his chest. What if it's the man, he thought? He didn't look too big from the few times he saw the man getting out of his car and walking up the driveway, but Terrance felt vulnerable in his current position. Maybe he should just take charge of the situation and jump the guy before he saw it coming, but do it in such a way that the man would never see his face.

Before he could make up his mind, Terrance heard the door to the bathroom across from the closet open - or was it being closed? He couldn't remember whether the door was open or closed from the few minutes he was in the basement. He closed his eyes tightly and tried to visualize it. If the person was in the bathroom right now with the door closed, he could jump out of the closet and run up the stairs and out of the house. He could calmly walk to his car and drive away without calling undue attention to himself.

This was an important moment in Terrance Jenkins's young life, and he knew it. Was that

door open or closed? He had to remember, but try as he might his memory failed him. Not sure what to do now, but desperate to do something, he cracked open the closet door to have a look. Terrance did recall that the bathroom was across from the closet he was in, but off to the left a bit. This angle should be enough to prevent the person from noticing if the closet door opened a little, even if the person was looking straight out of the bathroom.

He was careful to slide the woman's shoes and the man's robe off him without making any noise. As he crawled to his knees, his right calf cramped up enough that, under normal circumstances, he might have let out a little yowl. Still, he was able to get into a position on all fours with his face leaning to the side so that his right eye was pressed against the closed door. He reached up carefully and gently twisted the knob to the left and pushed open the door a fraction of an inch.

He could see the bathroom door and thanked God that it was closed. This outcome emboldened him enough to push his face out a little more to get a better look. He heard the toilet flush. Terrance knew it was now or never.

Whoever it was, they had already been in there a while. He assumed that, like him, most people took a piss or a dump first and then primp in the mirror for a few seconds. Whoever it was would be coming out in just a matter of seconds and he thought for a moment that maybe he blew his chance already. They'll open the door and see him running up the stairs in the very least. He'd have to run to his car and race out of the neighborhood, and that would call attention to him. He was about to sit back and cover himself up again before deciding to take another look.

The door was still closed and he could hear noises that suggested they were still busy in

there looking through drawers or something. He didn't hesitate this time as he sprang up from his kneeling position like an Olympic sprinter starting the hundred-meter dash. He was about three feet from the bottom of the stairs and was even positioning his hips and legs for the left turn when the bathroom door opened abruptly and a young white woman, looking down at her feet, stepped out.

It was too late for Terrance to do anything about it. He crashed into her hard, but in the process he tripped and fell on top of her with all his weight. She let out a faint grunt as the full bearing of his large frame forced the air out of her lungs. When Terrance pushed himself up on his forearms, for the briefest moment, their noses touched and they looked into each others' eyes at a lover's distance. But instead of love, he saw terror. For what seemed like a long time to Terrance but was really less than a second, neither one of them made a sound or attempted to move.

As soon as the shock of this unimaginable event was over for her, the woman started screaming louder than anyone he'd ever heard. Terrance, who was wearing thin blue gardening gloves to prevent leaving fingerprints, slammed his open hand over her mouth to stop her and she instantly bit into it. This caused him to hiss in pain and he balled his other hand into a fist and backhanded her across the face. Her screaming slowed, but did not stop as she struggled to get out from under Terrance, who was sitting on her stomach.

"God Dammit!" he hissed under his breath between clenched teeth. He remained calm enough to refrain from screaming at her the way he wanted to just now, but he did make the mistake of taking off the glove to see if she had broken the skin when biting his finger. He saw that she hadn't and felt relieved about that, but his distraction provided her with an opportunity

and she seized it by punching Terrance's testicles with several wild blows. Most of them were indirect hits, but the last one hit the mark and caused Terrance to shift his full weight off of her in a reflexive posture of self-defense.

The woman had achieved her goal of getting out from underneath Terrance, but she only recovered enough to stumble to her knees and turn feebly toward the stairs. He easily reached her in time, grasped her barefooted ankle with his good hand and pulled her back toward him. For a short time previously, she had stopped screaming, occupied as she was with her fuzzy headed play for freedom. But now she resumed her shrill cries for help.

Terrance grew increasingly afraid the neighbors might hear something, if they hadn't already. At least they were in the basement, he thought. That location should be far enough down and away from anyone, especially because the houses in this neighborhood were on one acre lots. The nearest house was almost a city block away, another reason he'd targeted this neighborhood, but it was coming in handy for another reason now. Still, that screaming had to stop.

The woman was wearing a thin silk robe with two shades of green geometric shapes placed all over it at different angles. She was naked underneath. Terrance could see this because the belt had come untied in the struggle and now, as she twisted around to a sitting position and attempted to pull her ankle out of his iron like grip, the whole package was right up close for him to see. In a testament to the consistent nature of the male mind, Terrance noticed that this white woman had amazing breasts. And she wasn't like some of the white girls he knew, who mostly had nice bodies but not very pretty faces. This woman looked like a model or something.

While Terrance was taking in the scenery, the woman pulled the knee of her free leg up to up to her stomach and kicked it back out again straight at his face. She did it so fast that he reacted



only at the last minute, angling his head to the side and down, like a man walking headlong into a snowstorm. The move spared him from a square on hit to the face, but the heel of her foot smashed directly into his Adams apple.

The pain of this injury surpassed the first. This time, however, his rage was far stronger and Terrance shrieked without restraint. The pain from his injuries, the pent up tension of the last half hour, the anger he felt toward this woman for what she had done to him, even the sexual arousal he felt from seeing her naked and terrified - it all coalesced in Terrance's psyche and he lost any remaining composure he still possessed.

Kneeling down with his injured right hand turned up as if in supplication to the god of vengeance, Terrance used his good hand to push up off his feet and bound up the stairs after her. His long legs consumed three steps at a time and he easily caught the woman in the doorway at the top of the stairs.

She was a couple of strides into the kitchen when he grabbed the collar of her robe at the base of her neck with his injured hand and ripped it off her body entirely. Her screaming, which again had stopped during her most recent effort to escape, started once again, only now it was louder and they were upstairs. She was in the living room now, heading straight for the front door, and if she made it outside, well, Terrance knew he simply could not let that to happen.

He locked in on her white, shapely ass and dove for it, just like he was making a tackle when he played linebacker on the junior varsity football team before dropping out of Parkland High back in Albany. He wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed with all his strength before they even hit the ground, but as they fell, the woman turned her upper body sideways and hit her head on the edge of a rectangular walnut coffee table.

Terrance heard the unmistakable thud of human flesh and bones meeting a harder object as their bodies fell together to the floor. It was a sound he'd heard before, sometimes inflicted on him by others, sometimes inflicted on others by him, but he perceived immediately the seriousness of the blow. He landed hard - for the second time now - on top of her body, which was now naked. He quickly bounded to his knees, inhaled a gulp of fresh air, and slowly rolled the woman on her back.

Terrance could sense she was hurt badly, but nonetheless heard a faint moan. He'd forgotten about his own injuries in the chase to catch and silence her, but seeing her condition reminded him of his own wounds - and that it was her who did this to him. His adrenaline had been pumping for over twenty minutes, and for the last few of those, it had been fueled by pain, arousal, and rage.

Seeing this rich and beautiful woman lay naked on the floor, moaning and vulnerable, pushed him into a zone of guttural instinctiveness. Her pale white skin and shoulder length blond hair contrasted against the teal colored carpet, emphasizing the prohibited nature of her status. Terrance knew that women like this lived in a world beyond his reach and, in fact, that the only brief encounters he'd ever had with them were marked by fear. Not his, of course, but theirs, a reaction he both enjoyed and resented simultaneously.

All these thoughts flashed through his mind as his eyes climbed over her body from head to toe. The impact of the table left a nasty gash on her right temple and it was swelling and bruised already. Yet, except for that and some carpet burns on the side of her thighs, she looked as if she might be sleeping. Her right hand with its red painted fingernails lay over her stomach.

Then, out of nowhere, Terrance heard his mother's voice. She was not telling him to stop

thinking crazy thoughts – a favorite phrase of hers – but was again telling her story about how black men abandoned black women during the sexual revolution – a favorite story of hers. They all wanted that forbidden fruit, she said, and now that a black man wouldn't actually get killed for coupling with a white girl, they all went crazy for it. If you can, control your manhood, she laughed and told him when he was 13 years old, but don't ever forget how beautiful your own women are.

Terrance pulled himself up and stood over the white woman. He looked at her naked body, but arousal had been replaced by shame and worry. He allowed himself just a moment to consider the long term implications of what had just happened before he took a deep breath and shook his head.

Think, dammit. Keep your cool. Keep your cool.

Paul Timmons needed to leave his office in Laurence Hall by at least a quarter to five if he was going to pick up the dry cleaning and be home in time. There were advantages to having an office in the middle of campus, but getting to your car was not one of them.

His wife Lauren worked in pharmaceutical sales and they were having dinner with her boss, Norman Barnes, and his wife Trudy at 6:30, but this was the third time they had arranged for such a dinner party. Paul had backed out of the first two attempts because he was doing research and forgot, or he was meeting with students - he couldn't remember exactly what just now - but he knew it couldn't happen again. He stuffed some work inside his leather bag and sprinted out

the door.

Laurence Hall was the oldest and prettiest building on campus, but it was also the furthest away from the faculty parking lot. Paul would have to hope he didn't run into any colleagues or students on the way, a long shot he knew, but he just couldn't say no when they asked for his advice or extra help.

He'd taught at Shipfield College, a small liberal arts institution in western Massachusetts, for almost four years now. He was one of the most popular professors on campus, partly owing to this accommodating nature of his, but also because of his lectures. Professor Paul Timmons made sociology relevant to his students so that even non-majors competed to enroll in his classes. And even though other instructors offered him compliments, he knew many resented the way students fawned over him. Moreover, many colleagues were also ambivalent about his campus activism, which also captivated the students. He'd recently organized a series of protests against a proposal to end affirmative action programs on campus where his public speaking ability and charisma helped to further build his reputation. Dr. Paul Timmons possessed a special talent for tapping into the natural idealism of young people that made them flock to him, to want to be just like him. He was a role model for them and he knew it - and liked it.

All this had earned him Teacher of the Year honors in just his second year and he already had a number of articles published in prestigious journals. He was well on his way to a full professorship with tenure. Paul was happy at Shipfield, no doubt about it, but he knew that professional satisfaction came at the expense of his relationship with Lauren.

Their not seeing enough of each other lately wasn't entirely his fault, though. She worked plenty of late nights, recently even more than he had. In many ways, she was just as ambitious

as he was and, in fact, on the personal side even more so; she wanted kids already. The issue hadn't yet caused a deep rift between them, but the fissures were there, and in spite of the fact that they could both see those nascent cracks clearly, each chose to look the other way. For his part, Paul loved children and always knew he wanted some of his own some day. Just not yet.

It was a beautiful early December day, warmer than usual, but nearly dark already. Paul noted that a handful of withered leaves still clung to the occasional tree branch and wondered when the first measurable snow fall would arrive. He'd grown up in the non-descript suburbs of Des Moines, Iowa and the rolling landscape of the Berkshires in western Massachusetts still struck him as otherworldly, no matter the season.

As he scampered along the diagonal sidewalks dissecting campus toward his car, two or three students nodded or waved as he passed them, but none stopped him. Paul decided this was a harbinger of good things to come this night. As he entered the faculty parking lot, he pushed the button on his key chain to unlock the door to his cherry red Subaru Outback and climbed in. Within minutes he was on Route 39 headed toward home. Just a quick stop to pick up Lauren's dress at the dry cleaners and he'd be in the clear.

Paul looked at his watch as he pulled out of Roland's Dry Cleaners on Route 39. 5:11 P.M. He was more than half way home, but the dry cleaners was busy and he'd had to wait more than 10 minutes; it was a delay he couldn't afford if he was going to make it home on time. Paul noted how the familiar knot of anxiety turned in his stomach. He'd always been a nervous

person, often working himself up over minor crises, even as a child, and he thought of this now as he negotiated the curves of Route 39, speeding toward home and his date with Lauren.

This memory, in turn, provoked another and he recalled an event from when he was eight years old and his mother was more than three hours late coming home from work on a dark winter night not too unlike this one. With each minute that passed, the young Paul had imagined her slumped over the wheel of her crumpled Ford Maverick, the victim of a horrific car crash. He hid from his sister and brother, peering out the window of the bathroom at the road that led to their house, sobbing and frantically searching for the outline of her car in the darkness. For some reason, he felt ashamed for them to see him that way.

His mother was just fine, late for some reason he didn't even remember now, but Paul always wondered about his reaction that night when he reflected on the incident. He certainly had no cause for abandonment issues as a little boy, but the depth of his reaction made a lasting impression. We all have certain memories from our childhood we carry, Paul had told his students, like whispers to yourself about who you really are. But he'd never figured out what this one was saying about him.

An old Eagles tune he liked came on the radio, snapping Paul out of his childhood visitation. He thought he might end up in a car accident himself right now if he wasn't careful, so he turned up the volume to the radio, switched on his high beams to help navigate the now black night and resolved to get home on time. No sooner had he committed to this goal, however, then did he see a police cruiser passing by him in the opposite direction.

"Shit," he whispered quietly, as if hoping not to draw attention to himself.

Paul glanced quickly in the direction of the speedometer to see how fast he was going:

Sixty-seven miles an hour, twelve over the speed limit. He tapped on the breaks hard enough to get down to fifty-five, and then he looked into the rear view mirror to see if the police car was making a U-turn. He could see its red taillights in the distance, but it was too dark to tell if the car was slowing down or continuing on. The butterflies in his stomach were thrashing wildly.

Paul conjured up the worst-case scenario in his mind. The cop would stop him, write him a ticket and send him on his way. The whole process would take ten, fifteen minutes tops, enough to get Lauren seriously pissed, but not enough to ruin the night entirely, especially considering that he wouldn't be late because of work. If his good fortune this night continued, the cop would keep on going.

Paul kept switching back and forth between watching the dark road and looking into the rear view mirror when he saw, not red lights in the distance, but small white ones. He couldn't be certain it was the cop, but he had a bad feeling his luck had run out.

"Shit," he said again, a little louder this time.

Sure enough, the white headlights grew larger very quickly until they were less than one hundred yards behind him. In a sign he was accepting this ill fate, Paul's racing heart beat eased a bit when the cop finally turned on his flashing red lights.

He slowed down and pulled over to the side of the road. The cop pulled in behind him, but at an angle and a few feet in towards traffic to protect himself, the way cops do on busy roads. Between the flashing red lights, the headlights, and that special light the police have mounted on their cars to illuminate dark spaces, Paul was awash in brightness. He wondered if anyone would drive by and recognize him as he watched the cop struggle to lift himself out of the car and begin to walk slowly up to the car. Paul noticed he was tall and, well not just big, but fat.

Really fat.

Waiting for the big, fat cop to reach him and wanting to expedite the process, Paul decided to roll down his window halfway and started to rumble through his leather bag for his wallet, looking for his driver's license. He had his head bent down and away from the window and both hands in his bag when he heard an unfamiliar clicking sound.

"Get your god damn hands out of the bag and put 'em where I can see 'em," yelled the cop.

Paul, shocked by what he heard, jerked his head leftward and saw only the shiny black polymer of the cop's Glock pistol - less than a foot away - pointed at his face.

"Hey, man," Paul said, "Take it easy, chief. I'm just looking for my wallet so I can get my I.D."

"Just get your hands out of the bag and put 'em where I can see 'em," yelled the fat cop.

Paul lifted his hands slowly out his backpack and held them out palms down over the steering wheel. He had a hard time believing this wasn't a joke or something. A cop had drawn a gun on him like he was a dangerous fugitive or something!

As it was, Paul was no fan of the police owing to his activities as an experienced social protestor. He he'd seen what jerks they could be and thought most were on some sort of power trip, ordering him and the students around, handling them roughly, calling them tree huggers and liberal faggots right to their faces. But this was beyond what he thought possible.

"All right," said Paul. "All right."

He waited now for explicit directions from the big, fat cop, not wanting to set him off any more that he already was.



"Listen to me," said the cop. "Take your right hand only and, slowly - very slowly - put the bag on the floor of the passenger seat."

Paul did as he was instructed, then sat erect with both hands holding the steering wheel and looked straight ahead. He decided not to make eye contact until asked a direct question.

"I need to see your driver's license and registration," said the cop.

"But that's what I was looking for in the back pack!" said Paul.

"Don't get an attitude with me," warned the cop. "You needed to wait for me to tell you to do that."

Paul shook his head slightly from side to side while bending down to get his wallet from the backpack.

"Slowly!" said the cop.

"I have to open the glove compartment to get the registration while I'm at it," Paul said.

"Just do it slowly," replied the cop.

Paul found the items and handed them to the cop. By this point, anger had replaced Paul's fear and anxiety, all the more so because he was thinking now of how this would spoil his plans with Lauren and, as the shock of the situation wore off, Paul grew more incredulous by the minute. Who was this guy to be treating him this way?

"Well, Mr. Timmons," the cop finally started, "Do you know how fast you were going?"

Paul never knew how to handle that question, not that he'd received that many traffic tickets. But he'd had his share and he never could decide if you were better off telling the truth or lying. With this asshole, however, he was pretty it wouldn't matter.

"Well, no sir, I'm sorry," said Paul, "I don't. Was I going that fast?"

"Twenty over the speed limit," said the cop.

Paul was incensed now. The cop was flat out lying! Paul knew he was only going twelve over, but he couldn't very well call the cop on it considering he lied first.

"Nawww," said Paul. "Are you sure?"

"The radar gun don't lie, Mr. Timmons," said the cop. "And I don't make mistakes."

You fat son of a bitch, thought Paul.

"Where you goin' in such a hurry to get there, Mr. Timmons?" asked the cop.

"No emergency, Officer," said Paul, "but I am late for an important date with my wife. I know it's no excuse, but, you know."

"No," said the cop, "I don't know, Mr. Timmons. I don't know why so many people I see on the road every day put themselves and others at risk by driving recklessly for no good reason."

Paul hesitated, a reaction he knew the cop was aiming for, and he was mad at himself for supplying it. He thought acting deferential with the cop might speed things up and get him the hell out of here, but he could see now that things weren't going to work out that way. He was going to be really late now and that would turn into a big deal between him and Lauren.

"Please," said Paul. "I know I may have been speeding, but I was hardly driving recklessly. And, come on, did you really need to draw your gun on me?"

He decided to push things a bit. "I know you guys are given guidelines about what situations warrant that. Did this really qualify?"

The cop chuckled softly, not the reaction Paul was aiming for. The fat cop was winning now, two to zero.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Timmons?" asked the cop.

Paul was caught off guard, but answered.

"I'm a college professor," he said.

"Jesus, that explains things," said the cop, shaking his head.

"Mr. Timmons, I mean, Professor Timmons," he said, laughing, "I'm gonna write you up for going ten miles per hour over the speed limit, but you're lucky I don't write you up for more, and even luckier I don't arrest you for inciting a police officer."

"And let me give you a little advice, Professor Timmons," he continued. "You may be the boss in the classroom with a bunch of fuckin' kids, but out here in the real world, all your book learning don't make you special. You gotta follow the rules like everybody else. You got that?"

Paul ached to rip into this country bumpkin of a cop. With his quick wit and speaking ability, he knew he could cut just about anyone down to size. He learned as a kid how to do whatever he wanted with words, including how to charm and flatter people - or how to hurt and humiliate them. This idiot would be verbal cannon fodder, but if he held out even a remote hope that he could still salvage the night with Lauren, he would have to bite his tongue. There would be time later to officially protest this abusive police behavior.

"Thank you for your concern," said Paul, hoping the cop was perceptive enough to pick up the sarcasm, but also that Paul was accepting this way out of the situation for the both of them.

The cop simply nodded in return before telling Paul, "You stay right here, Mr. Timmons. I have to go back to the car for a minute, but I'll be right back."

Paul didn't say anything, but simply watched in his rear view mirror as the cop waddled back to the police cruiser and gingerly lowered himself in. Paul guessed he was running his

plates and registration while writing up the ticket. Then he thought of Lauren again and looked at his watch.

5:33 P.M.

"Shit," he whispered for the third time this night.

If the cop gave him his ticket and let him go in five minutes, he could be home by six o'clock or so, but the damage was done. By the time he got dressed and drove out to her boss's house - at least a forty-five minute drive - they were going to be seriously late, something Paul knew from Lauren that her boss loathed. Plus, he had already stood them up twice! Lauren was going to be so mad.

When Paul looked again at his watch, a vaguely disturbing thought entered his mind. Why hadn't Lauren called him on his cell phone yet? She was the type who would call you even before you were supposed to be somewhere just to make sure you were on your way, and yet he hadn't heard from her even though he was supposed to be home by now. This wasn't like her. Maybe she was so angry and fed up that she decided to go on her own without telling him. Before he could decide how to feel about this latest development, however, Paul noticed the fat cop struggle to get out of his car and begin walking up again to his own. Paul waited for the cop to get right up to the window and made him tap on it with his knuckles before rolling it down just a crack this time.

"Here's your license and registration, Mr. Timmons," said the cop. "And I did write you up for going 65 in a 55 mile per hour zone," he added, slipping Paul the various documents one at a time.

Paul almost said thank you out of habit, but caught himself and only nodded while staring

at the dashboard. It was a pitiful protest, but at least it was something. Thanks for ruining my marriage, asshole, Paul thought to himself.

"You drive carefully," said the cop, a sarcastic tone creeping back into his voice, "so you can have a good time with your wife tonight."

Paul looked at the bottom of the ticket for where he knew cops had to sign their names. Officer Harold Enright of the Berkshire County Sheriff's Department. Fat and named Harold, Paul thought. Now *that* explains everything. Paul smiled big and wide so that Fat Harry was sure to notice and then he pulled out onto the road.

4

The woman was moving her head slightly, making soft moaning sounds and Terrance could see her chest rising and falling in a slow, uneven rhythm. He sniffled and shook his head in a snapping motion and, slowly, the aperture of his mind expanded and he started to take in the physical environment surrounding the woman's body. The teal carpeting, the coffee table she hit her head on, the white front door to the house, the wood panel floor in the kitchen to his left.

Terrance was struggling to interpret a huge red and black abstract painting on the wall above the black leather sectional when the sound of the telephone ringing rocked him out of his lingering stupor like an alarm clock waking someone from a fitful sleep. He jumped to his feet in a quick, cat like motion one might not expect from such a tall man. The phone rang a second and then a third time before the feeling of terror subsided in him as he remembered no one else was home to answer it.

The phone rang twice more before stopping and Terrance wondered if these people had voice mail instead of an answering machine. He'd been at a job once when the person who lived there called and left a message on the answering machine for his wife, basically letting Terrance know he could take his time, as the woman of the house wasn't expected to be home for a while, but that the man would be even later than that. Even if this person would be over to the house soon, at least Terrance would know if these fucking people had an answering machine.

Just like that, he was back now, in full control of his faculties and thinking clearly for the first time since before the white woman bit him. The full realization of what happened hit him with full force and for a brief moment Terrance felt as if he might get sick.

He dug down deep within himself in an extra effort to control his emotions and figure out what to do next. The phone call was a warning to act quickly and get the hell out of there because, whoever it was - probably the husband - they were calling for the woman. They were expecting her to be home, so her not answering would probably make them nervous. They might or might not call again to give her another chance to answer, but it was only a matter of time before they came over to check on her, that is, if they weren't planning on being here soon anyway. Terrance looked around the house, as if an answer to his dilemma might be hidden under the couch or something.

Gradually, he began to feel panicked again, understanding as he did that time was running out, that someone would come to the house any minute – or that she might wake up. He lost his nerve for a moment and considered just getting the hell out of there. He never wanted to hurt anybody, first because it got you into serious trouble with the law and meant you'd be on the run, maybe for years, but also because he took no pleasure in the idea as some other guys he'd known

seemed to. And he sure as hell didn't want to kill this woman, even after what she had done to him. Despite all the precautions he took, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But she'd had way too good a look at him. However injured she might seem lying unconscious on the floor right now, Terrance knew that, if she recovered, she could ID him when the cops started to investigate. It wouldn't take long for them to begin looking at criminals with a record who lived in Albany, especially known gang members. His photo and record were in the first books they would give her to look through.

Terrance took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw her naked body on the floor, now feeling disgusted at what he saw. It seemed crazy to him that, in a way, it would be better if she actually was dead now.

"Dammit, Lady!" he cursed while looking down at her.

He had moved so that when he looked at her now she was upside down, her head just a few inches from his toes. He still had no idea what to do and for a moment continued his fruitless survey of the house for an answer. Terrance hated the sight of the woman now, but recognizing how he was wasting time, he forced himself to examine her, believing that looking directly at a problem was the only way to solve it. No answer came from this endeavor either, but he eventually realized she was no longer moving or making moaning sounds.

"Jesus," he whispered, frozen in place, not from indecision now, but from fear.

In time, he got down on all fours and placed his ear as close to her mouth and nose as possible.

Nothing.

He sat up on his rear end and watched her chest.

Nothing.

He rose to his feet and began to shuffle slowly away from the woman's body, all the while holding his gaze upon her unmoving chest. When Terrance backed into the front door, the knob hit his backside and he jumped and let out a little scream. He turned back around and held still for just a moment before walking quickly through the living room, past the woman's body, and into the kitchen. He found some Windex under the sink and wiped down the counter where he remembered grabbing it with his bare hand as he chased her earlier. Then he stuffed the paper towel in his pant pocket, along with the blue glove that was still on his left hand, but this made him realize he'd taken the other glove off after she'd bit it. He looked around for it in the kitchen, but didn't see it. Then he remembered that he'd taken it off on the stairs, so he looked for it there, and found it about 10 steps down.

Terrance, outwardly calm, but inside feeling freaked out, made his way to the back door, opened it and looked for signs of activity. When he saw no one, he ran down the driveway, across the street to his stolen car, and drove away more quickly than he'd planned, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Paul looked into his rear view mirror for a good five minutes after he had pulled away from Officer Harold Enright of the Berkshire County Sheriff's Department. He decided that Big Harry must have either waited for a long time by the side of the road or turned around and went the other way because he hadn't seen a pair of headlights in either direction since he got back on



the road.

His thoughts returned to why Lauren hadn't called him on the cell phone yet. It was 5:48 P.M. now. He hoped before that her not calling might be good news - maybe she was running late, too - but he understood now that this was wishful thinking. Paul's guess was that she drove to her boss' house without him and would make him figure that out on his own, her way of beginning his punishment. Paul would have to track her down, in fact probably call the Barnes's house, and apologize profusely to everyone, both on the phone and later when he got there. But this also reminded him that the night was still salvageable. He would get there eventually, very late of course, but they could probably have drinks or something until he arrived and keep dinner warm in the oven. He would beg forgiveness again in person and, unless Lauren's boss and his wife were complete assholes, he could win them over with his crazy story about the fat cop pulling a gun on him.

Paul decided to try calling home on his cell phone first. He let the phone ring five or six times before the voice mail service came on. He was disappointed but not surprised she didn't answer. He wondered what to say as he listened to Lauren's recorded voice ask the caller to leave a message.

"Honey? It's me," said Paul. "I'm really sorry, Baby. I know you're mad, but I got pulled over by a cop for speeding. You're not gonna believe how this jerk treated me. Please don't be angry. I'm on my way home now, about ten minutes away. Call me on my cell if you get this message. "

"I'm really sorry, Baby." he repeated. "I know how much this meant to you and I really tried this time. Please call me."

Next, he could try Lauren's cell phone, which he thought she would answer unless she was already at their house, in which case she would probably turn it off. He pushed the button on his own cell phone to speed dial her number. When her voice mail didn't come on automatically, but instead the phone began to ring, he knew she didn't have the phone turned off. But then he wondered why she didn't answer. When her voice mail message finally did come on, he left essentially the same message he did earlier, with an additional plea asking where she was.

In the time it took to make these calls, more than five minutes had passed and Paul was nearly home. But now, he felt even more anxious. He would have to look up the Barnes's number when he got home and give them a call. Hopefully, she was already over there and he could get on with the mea culpas.

Paul turned off Route 39 onto Lexington Avenue, the main road leading into Grandville, Massachusetts, the small town where he and Lauren lived. He passed the Dunkin Donuts and the green painted walls of Fidelity's Grocery Store, the first real landmarks on the edge of town and the now subconscious markers that warned him that Baker Street, the road leading to his neighborhood, was about a quarter of a mile ahead on the right. They'd bought this house two years ago, but he still needed to search for Baker Street, especially in the dark.

He noticed a dark color sedan was poised to turn left out onto Lexington from Baker Street and fixed his eyes on its hubcaps, using them as a reference point for where exactly he had to turn. As he made the turn, his headlights revealed the car to be an old, green colored sedan with rust spots on the front panel. Paul didn't recognize the car, but thought little of it. People used Baker Street to cut over from Washtenaw Avenue, one of the other major roads in town.

Even in his hurried and distracted state, Paul avoided speeding through his neighborhood,

not because he just got a ticket, but because there were a lot of kids around, even in early winter. Once it snowed, they'd be off the streets. Until then, they would ride their skateboards and bicycles out from behind cars all the time. He had almost hit one of them the first week they lived here and Lauren, who was reading in the passenger seat at the time, looked up at the last minute and screamed louder than he thought possible for someone her size. He smiled now, thinking of how she chewed him out afterward.

After driving a half-mile or so on Baker Street, Paul made another right onto Ridge Road, the street their house was on. Ridge Road was a dead end street that curved right then left up a steep hill. Theirs was the third from the last house on the right, the one with red brick and a blue door is how they described it when giving directions to newcomers. Paul saw Lauren's silver Audi in the driveway and lights on in both the first and second stories. He was relieved to see she was home, but wondered even more why she hadn't answered his phone calls. Maybe she'd canceled their dinner date with her boss and was so mad she was refusing to speak to him. He pulled in behind her car, turned off his own, and took a deep breath. This is gonna be ugly, thought Paul.

Paul felt the chill of the early winter evening as he shut the car door, but didn't bother to zip up his coat for the short walk to the house. He slung his leather bag over his shoulder and walked quickly up the driveway and the curved sidewalk leading to their blue front door. He pondered what his first words to her should be, as he knew from their past arguments that they would set the tone for whatever followed.

He was fumbling for his keys in his jacket pocket when he twisted the doorknob and discovered it was locked, not unusual for Lauren when she was home alone, as she even insisted he lock the door when both of them were home. He opened the door, half expecting her to be

sitting on the sofa, dressed and ready to go, delivering her hard stare, her I'm angry as hell stare. He hated to see that stare.

Instead, he saw her lying naked on the floor.

Only a handful of people experience moments in their lives that elicit a raw response, one unfiltered by the need to calculate how others will perceive them. Soldiers do it in pierced battles. Passengers do it in airplane crashes as they begin to realize they have only a few seconds to live. And Paul experienced such a moment when he first viewed Lauren's lifeless and naked body lying on their living room floor. In less than the time it took him to bolt to her side and drop to his knees, he figured out what had happened, even if he had yet to accept the reality of it.

His mind ticked off the list of possibilities faster than a mainframe computer, starting with the most benign and working sequentially to the most dreadful. She wasn't sleeping. She would never play such a horrible joke - she was far too dignified for that. She might run naked from the master bathroom to the hall closet for a towel or something, but never downstairs. She would put her robe on, even when alone. She said you never knew when someone might walk up and see you through the window and, in fact, complained loudly whenever he had dashed around the house with no clothes on.

Paul knew someone did this to her as soon as he spotted the two inch long gash on the side of her head, which was swelling up by now and turning black and blue. It didn't appear she'd been stabbed anywhere, nor did he see any blood.

He cried out, "No, Baby, no. Oh please, God, no. Baby, what happened? Oh God, Baby, what happened?"

He laid his ear next to her mouth to listen for breath. He felt nothing and began sobbing,

tears streaming down his face.

"No, Baby, No," he started again. "Oh please God, no!"

He'd already considered that she might be dead, but he refused to believe it. He thought of taking her pulse, something he never felt confident he could do correctly, but he reached for her left arm anyway, which lay across her lower abdomen.

The horror of what had happened to her was undeniable to him now. Paul felt as though he was trapped in hell, floating in a place where the normal constraints of time and context are irrelevant. Neither was this was a movie or a TV show. This was real and it was happening to him, to her, to them. And it wasn't going to go away.

On his knees crouched down beside her, Paul couldn't bear to look at any part of her naked body any longer. He focused instead on her face and, without warning, began to imagine what her last few minutes must have been like. He clenched his fists and began hitting his thighs as hard as he could.

"Oh my God, no," he screamed. " Oh, Baby! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!"

He felt numb and dread and pain and anger all at once. This is what people fear most and it was actually happening to them. But, still, he refused to accept the final outcome. She might still be alive and, he realized with sudden terror, he might be wasting precious time. Paul sprang up and over to the cordless phone in the kitchen, clutched it with both hands and dialed 911. It seemed like it took forever for someone to answer the phone.

"This is 911," a man's voice said. "Do you have an emergency?"

"My wife is hurt bad," Paul shouted. "You need to send an ambulance right now! We live on 173 Ridge Road between Lexington and Washtenaw off Baker Street in Grandville. Send one

now! Please! She's hurt bad!"

"We'll send someone right away," the dispatcher said, "but you need to tell me what happened, sir,"

"I just got home," Paul said. "It looks like someone broke in and hurt her."

He hesitated for the briefest moment. This next part was difficult for him to say out loud even now, as if doing so would make what had happened irreversible.

"She's lying naked on the floor and she's unconscious, not moving at all" he continued.

"She's got a welt on the side of her head and I can't tell if she's breathing."

"Uh, she's not responding at all, sir?" asked the dispatcher.

Even Paul noticed the hint of alarm in the dispatcher's voice now.

"Noooh," moaned Paul. He started to sob once more. "Maybe I'm doing something wrong."

There was a strained silence before Paul blurted out yet again.

"Oh, please God, no," he cried. "Please, God, no! Send someone now, please send someone now!"

"They're already on the way, sir," said the dispatcher, regaining his composure. "Please try to remain calm, sir. That's the best way to help your wife now."

Grandville, Massachusetts did well in the 1990s, long before the real estate crash to come in the subsequent decade. What had been a sleepy village in western Massachusetts for over a century had blossomed into an upscale bedroom community of ambitious professionals, many of

whom worked in Albany, the capital of New York about 50 miles away across the state border.

New developments of sprawling colonial houses had emerged continuously from the rolling countryside, like brick behemoths swallowing the land. Old timers sometimes complained about the parade of fancy SUVs and even fancier "shoppes" that had popped up on Main Street in the village - filled as they were with twelve hundred dollar lamps and other such nonsense.

Permeating such expected class resentments, however, was the recognition on everyone's part that the changes in Grandville were, overall, a good thing. All those houses, all those "shoppes", even all those SUV's and fancy cars were a part of what the village elders - in a good natured, self deprecating way - referred to as "eeconomic deeevelopment". And though the most recent downturn had led to some foreclosures and store closures alike, the bedroom community of Grandville was still a very desirable place to live.

Yet, while centrifugal force may be what makes the world go 'round, it is taxes that make municipal governments spin forward, and the swelling of Grandville's local government services reflected the ever growing revenue stream. Two new elementary schools and a new high school had been built within the last five years, not just to accommodate the increased enrollment, but also the increased expectations of the educated newcomers. Their children's attendance in new, state of the art schools was, in their minds anyway, a validation of their emerging status. In addition, three new firehouses had been built, new roads and sewer systems intersected the area, and sundry parks dotted the new developments, with one or two added to the townie neighborhoods, if somewhat as an afterthought.

What had not grown in the same proportion was the local police force. Before the boom of the nineties the Village of Grandville had a total of three officers on the beat, and one of those

was the chief. By the end of the boom, that force had increased by only two members, though Chief Theodore Herndon, still at the helm, was a full time administrator now, running things from the only police station, a building that doubled as city hall.

Crime was nearly non-existent in Grandville before the boom. It was a small, country village back then with little of value for urban criminal types to covet. Occasionally, someone would steal tools or a bicycle, or the local teenage boys would get drunk and vandalize a fence or something, but that was about the extent of it. There wasn't much traffic to monitor or very many neighborhoods to cruise, either. The police force was small for a reason.

Even well into the boom and the recession that followed, the situation wasn't that much different. There were, of course, a lot of changes by then, and "the boys", as everyone called them, were stretched thin just doing routine business. But most of the newcomers were upper middle class and, politically correct or not, that rank of folks just doesn't engage in the same volume of illegal activity as people from the lower echelons of the economic strata.

Still, in the last year or so, Chief Herndon had indeed spotted some troubling trends in the region. Grandville was becoming, not only a larger community, but also a destination point for visitors drawn mostly to the new village stores, restaurants, and cultural amenities. And money attracts people, plain and simple. First come the houses and the wealthier people who own them, then come the stores, restaurants, and artists to serve them, and finally the tourists and more distant locals who are drawn by the cachet of the region's emerging reputation as a happening place. At some point, mixed among the rising tide of humanity, is the criminal element, a small minority to be sure, but their numbers increase in proportion to the overall flood.



Chief Herndon had noted along with the others that Grandville's' growth was, in many ways, a good thing. But it did mean new demands on the small police force. And it meant the small town feel of years gone by was going bye - fast. He couldn't tell anymore, for example, who was a stranger and who lived in the area just by looking at them, a useful if sometimes misleading police tactic he'd lost a long time ago.

In addition, petty theft complaints were up dramatically in the village stores, something not unexpected considering how many more stores there were and how many more out of town shoppers frequented those businesses. And even more troubling, residential break-ins and stolen cars were on the rise, as well, something that used to be quite uncommon. Chief Herndon wasn't particularly surprised at any of these developments, but he was growing increasingly worried the community was in denial about them. With all the money they were splashing on schools and parks, asking the village movers and shakers for more money for the police department always produced a reaction somewhere between bemusement and annoyance. "What for, Chief?" was the most common response. The old timers didn't want to let go of their peace of mind, and the newcomers liked to think they left those kinds of problems behind.

Not everyone was blind to the changing circumstances, though. Chief Herndon had found that one of the newcomers in particular understood that the village would have to undertake proactive measures if it was going to impede this budding crime problem. His name was Charlie Sanders and he had moved to the area five years ago. He was a CPA in Albany, but unlike most of the recent arrivals, he became thoroughly involved in local affairs, especially politics. He was elected to the school board soon after arriving, served his three-year term, and then ran for village council president and won that, too.

Sanders had been the only village official who expressed sympathy for Chief Herndon's requests for more help. He had served on the city council in Albany during a period of economic hardship and municipal layoffs, so he had seen firsthand what happens when the police don't have the personnel to prevent crime. But even Sanders, Chief Herndon realized, would need some coaxing before he'd push hard for significantly more resources for the police department. This wasn't the 1960s anymore; all politicians at all levels of government think twice before raising taxes since the Reagan Revolution. Sanders knew his fellow residents were okay with paying more taxes for schools and roads, things where it was easy to see how they improved your life. But no one wants to pay for more cops, that is until they need one. And these people didn't want to admit they might need one out here in the safe cocoon of the exurban fringe. Even Charlie Sanders wasn't quite ready to accept that the very problems he had fled in Albany were beginning to follow him to Grandville.

Still, Chief Herndon was a patient man. He had planned a long-range strategy for getting the necessary increases in his department and the first step involved getting Village Council president Sanders to be a more vocal ally. The chief was, in fact, drafting a memo for this very purpose, one outlining the projected budgetary implications of additional staffing needs, when the phone in his office rang.

"Hello, Chief Herndon here."

"Ted," said Lonny Stevens, the dispatcher who had taken the 911 call from Paul Timmons. "I think we got a real problem in the Netherwood development, out by Lexington and Washington."

"What's wrong?" asked Chief Herndon calmly, though he knew it must be serious if Lonny

Stevens was calling him directly.

"I just took a call from a guy named Paul Timmons who lives on Ridge Road out there," said Lonny. "You know him?"

"No," said Chief Herndon. "Why? What's going on, Lonny?"

"Ted," said Lonny, "he told me he got home and found his wife unconscious, lying naked on the floor. No sign of life is what he basically said. Ted the guy was losing it, man. The whole thing freaked me out."

Lonny Stevens had been the dispatcher for the Grandville Police Department for over ten years, though until three years ago he also did double duty working the phones for the village government as well. He'd always been a solid guy, but Chief Herndon had noticed that he was a bit stressed by the changes in the type and number of calls he was taking in recent years.

"Well, did you get on it, Lonny?" asked Chief Herndon.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," said Lonny. "An ambulance should be there by now, and I sent Lou and Tony in Car Three - they were in the village, but they were the closest. You were the next call, so this thing just went down, but I figured you should probably get out there."

"All right, Lonny," said Chief Herndon, feeling a little guilty about losing his patience. "I'm on my way over there. But you better get the county sheriffs over there, too. We're going to need help on this one."