Tacoma

Peter

He first noticed it when they were unloading the U-Haul: if the wind blew a certain way, a foul odor came creeping up the hill, like a fog. “I don’t smell it,” Terri said. She was in the master bedroom, unpacking a box of books neither of them had ever read: *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, half of the Chicken Soup series, a spindly book about banana slugs. The brown boxes were stacked on the carpet, her neat handwriting detailing the contents of each: hairdryer, cold & flu, running gear, snow pants. Their seven-month-old was asleep in his day bassinette, a soft rubber giraffe tucked beneath his right arm.

“Come outside,” he said. “It’s bad right now.”

They went out to the porch. A few scattered stars hung in the evening sky. The house had a view of the mountains, tide flats, and the factories spouting their steam and gray smoke. Terri took a deep breath through her nose. “No,” she said. “I can’t smell it. You’re upset about the movers. Next you’ll say the kitchen is too small.”

The move hadn’t gone smoothly. The dog’s bed had disappeared. A bicycle tire went missing. A box filled with receipts. When the two men they hired to help finished unloading the truck, Peter was handed a bill for twice the amount he’d originally been quoted.

“You really don’t smell it?” he asked.

“No,” she said, turning to go back inside. “I don’t.”

When his father called that night, he had trouble describing the smell: it wasn't chemical, he thought, nor was it pungent like sulfur, garlic, or onions. "I know there's a paper mill," he said. "But I don't think it's the smell of something being manufactured."

"Well, you got a good deal on the house," his father said. "You're tied to it now." His father had been married three times, had four bypass surgeries, and ate steak for dinner every night. "If you can stay there for ten years, you might actually come out on top, for once."

Ten years seemed like an eternity.

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The next morning, from the porch, Peter could see the red brick buildings of the paper mill and, beyond that, the tide flats. The wind blew at a steady seven miles per hour. The foul odor had dissipated. There was only the pleasant scent of damp concrete. Terri had taken the baby and gone to work.

Peter had a week before starting his new job. He could explore the town, get a haircut, go to a movie. He hadn't been to a movie since the baby was born. He picked out a drama with lots of guns and violence, something Terri would never go see. He was about to leave when there was a thump-thump-thump on the front door. A short, stout woman in a purple and gold tracksuit stood on the porch armed with a giant clipboard.

"Liz Stringer," she said, jabbing out her hand. "Integrated Solutions. You have a beautiful home. Have you given any thought to home security?"

He said he hadn't.

"The neighborhood is getting a lot better," she said. "I wouldn't have even come down here five years ago. It's mostly burglaries and auto theft now. Only a few home invasions."

"Only a few?"

When Terri and Peter first looked at the house, it hadn't seemed like a bad neighborhood. There were vacant lots, sure, but they were well-maintained, lawns neatly mowed and trash free. Vacant lots were better than boarded up houses, he'd thought at the time, but in retrospect, the lots gave the neighborhood a tentative, hollowed-out feeling.

"What you need are cameras," Liz Stringer said, tapping the clipboard. "I see three easy points of entry, four if they can climb. A camera won't stop a butcher knife to the chest—only a gun will do that—but if someone tries to get in while you're sleeping, an alarm will go off and a squad car will be here in less than ten minutes."

Peter was surprised. "Ten minutes seems like a long time," he said.

"That's why you need backup." She lifted her shirt to show him her holster. The gun was a forty-five caliber—something he didn't want in his home.

"We're not really gun people," Peter said. His father back in Wisconsin owned guns. Handguns, assault rifles, shotguns. Peter went shooting with him once when he was a boy and accidently pointed a rifle at his sister. His father lectured him the entire way home. He still brought up the incident at family functions.

"That's what everyone says—until something happens," Liz Stringer said. "Keep an open mind. You're not in Kansas anymore." She showed him some of the security packages. They had names like the Ambassador, Safe Haven, and Operation: Maverick. "If you or anyone in your family is military, you get a ten percent discount on installation," she said. "Anybody, no matter how distant. They don't even have to be living."

He took the woman's card.

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That afternoon, when Terri came home from work, she was happier than she'd been in a long time. She was a special needs teacher and, in Bellingham, where they'd come from, the parents of her students were overbearing and entitled, but at her new school, they were just glad to have someone young and with energy. "I feel like I could actually make a difference here," she said. "And the parents are so kind."

Peter touched the baby's chin and lifted him from the carrier. "That's great, honey," he said. He wanted to tell her about the home invasions, but she was in such a good mood. Henry did okay at daycare—he cried, but that was to be expected—and her commute was a fraction of what it had been before.

Terri eyed the boxes still stacked in the entryway, the half-opened kitchen cabinets, trash bags filled with thrift store blankets and puffy winter coats. "Not a very productive day?" she asked.

It hadn't been. While she was at work, Peter began to unpack, but then every ten minutes, he thought he heard something, so he'd get up and pace around. He checked the locks on the window, looked in the hallway closet, still empty, save for a stack of puzzles and boardgames. He examined the cellar and mudroom, already cluttered with gardening tools. Finally, he figured it out. There was a big leaf maple in the vacant lot next door, and starlings were flying from the tree to a hole in the house.

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"Do you think we need to call someone to patch it?" he asked Terri. They were standing in the yard looking up at the hole. She had Henry in her arms. The hole was twenty-five, maybe thirty feet up. His ladder might not even go that far.

"It's where a rain gutter was," Terri said. "I don't think it goes very deep." The house was a hundred years old—it was full of quirks.

"What if something else gets in there?"

"Like what?" she asked. They watched the bird fly into the hole with a beak full of twigs and a wadded up fast-food wrapper. The baby cooed and pointed.

"I don't know. A rat."

"A flying rat?" Terri leaned against the little chain link fence that surrounded their property. There was some machine noise in the distance, metal wheels grinding to a halt. The high-pitched whine of an engine running at full speed. White smoke curled up from a gray chimney.

"Rats can climb, dear," he said.

"I know that, dear."

*

Peter climbed the dull, dented ladder, rung by rung, until he reached the hole. "What do you see?" Terri called out. The hole was larger than he expected, the size of a grapefruit. Rats and squirrels could easily enter, burrow into the walls, and dig through the attic insulation. He put his hand in the hole, patted around. He reached a little further.

"What is it?" Terri said.

His hand wouldn't come out.

"I'm stuck."

"Your what?"

When Peter was a boy, his father had enlisted him to help re-shingle the roof. As he ecstatically pounded a few nails in, he got too close to the edge, lost his balance, and begin to

fall—his father caught him by the arm, and then carried Peter down the ladder weeping. He never went up on the roof again.

Liz Stringer

Liz Stringer woke up in her 1998 Toyota Sienna minivan, took a toothbrush out of a black canvas travel bag, and covered the bristles evenly with Crest Pro-Enamel. The floor of the Sienna was cluttered, dirty socks, a folded-up pizza box; a lime green sports bra hung from the rearview mirror to deter unwanted visitors. Beneath the driver's seat, was her forty-five caliber.

Like many people in town, Liz Stringer had fallen on hard times. Did she like meth? Yes, absolutely. There was nothing comparable. Did she like that she liked it? No, it had cost her everything, her relationship, home, and her job. Clean four months now, she was ready to rebuild. Gone was the woman with the eyebrow ring who had introduced her to the drug. Gone were the sleepless nights, the jittery sex, the lies. It had started innocently enough. She was working in home security, moonlighting as a bouncer at the Boneyard. The woman with an eyebrow ring played pool every night. Liz liked the way she blew chalk from the cue and ran the table at nine ball. She liked her anatomical heart tattoo and lashes thick with mascara. Liz introduced herself by placing three quarters on the worn felt table. She won six games out of ten. From then on, they played every night.

First it was cocaine. Liz enjoyed the bulletproof confidence. Plus, working at the nightclub, she needed to stay awake. But that quickly progressed to other drugs. In no time, she was staying out all night, stealing from Britta. When she was arrested for possession, that was the last straw. Britta refused to pay her bail.

But all of that was behind her now. Liz was in business for herself. She had equipment in a rented storage unit: cameras, motion detecting sensors, all the requisite electronics. *Integrated Solutions.* Soon she'd have enough money to pay Britta back, earn her trust again. She only needed a few clients to get the ball rolling. Things would be like they were before. Never again would she take Britta's love for granted, nor take advantage of her. Until then, Liz Stringer could survive sleeping in the minivan beside the river.

There was a gray, rust stained RV parked twenty yards away, beneath the bridge. A man with a beard came out, narrow face, beaten down by life, a cluster of dreadlocks on top of his head. He had widely spaced, corn-kernel teeth. This was Rudy, her neighbor. An ancient yellow dog limped behind him. Rudy and the dog lived in the RV by the river, just as Liz lived in a Toyota Sienna.

Liz got out of the Sienna, swished water, spat Crest in the dirt. Down the embankment, the muddy river churned and lulled. A hundred yards further, an animal rendering facility turned cow, horse and pig parts into grease, bone meal, and other useful products. The smell from the facility was overpowering, nauseating, but to longtime residents of the city, like Liz Stringer and Rudy, it was barely noticeable.

"I'm out of beer," Rudy said. He dropped a Budweiser can in the debris, belched, and crunched it with his size thirteen boot. The boot was coming apart at the seams.

"Classy," Liz said.

She scratched her bristly legs and sunk her hands into the pockets of her cargo shorts. Rudy's nose was runny, his skin blotchy. Whatever he had, it looked contagious. She heard him coughing away in his RV at night. She sometimes hated the company she kept, but she liked

Rudy, and there was too much to do on her own, too many plans. She had prospective clients lined up, some of them just needed a little convincing.

She took a small package wrapped in waxy brown butcher paper from the pocket of her cargo shorts. She handed the package to Rudy. “Here, a present.”

Rudy straightened his shoulders, and carefully peeled back a corner of the butcher paper, revealing the compact metal handle of a starter pistol. The handle was missing a screw, the barrel of the gun welded shut. “I hate guns. Does this thing even work?”

“For our purposes, yes.” Liz tried to snatch the pistol, but Rudy pulled it away. He pointed at a raspberry bush by the riverbank. Nobody ever ate the raspberries. They were covered toxins from the highway, from the factories. “You need to get in their house,” Liz said. “I’m not saying take anything. Just see if you can get in. Have a look around. Make a racket. Let them see you’re serious.”

“And then what?”

“And then we have a lifetime customer. Nobody who buys into home security cancels their policy. It just doesn’t happen. Treat the customer right, and they’ll be a lifetime customer. ” She took a piece of beef jerky from a side pocket and bit into the wrapper. “I’ve been in this business a long time, I know.”

Rudy

In a Folgers can beneath the RV’s sink, behind a broken cassette player, a ceramic wiener dog, and a dozen Instant Noodle cups, Rudy kept a stack of bills—six-hundred and twenty-eight dollars in total. He peeled off the lid and carefully recounted. Soon he’d be on a beach in Hawaii,

he told himself. He'd get a motel room, stay drunk an entire week. Maybe he'd camp beneath the stars, swim with the sea turtles. Who knows? Maybe he'd stay forever.

Rudy's lungs wheezed and rattled as he steadied himself on the RV's kitchenette. He'd been sick for a week, maybe longer. Like many people in Tacoma, he didn't get his annual flu shot and was now suffering from a particularly virulent strain of influenza A. The inside of the RV was a veritable petri dish of the virus. He blew his nose with a soiled strip of fabric softener he'd been using as a tissue. He wanted to believe in the invincibility of youth, to learn to sail and surf on the beaches of Maui, but as his thirtieth birthday approached, his immune system weakened and frail, he worried he was more likely to be spending his time in a hospital bed than a white sandy beach somewhere.

Rudy closed his eyes and thought of the Folgers can hidden beneath the sink, the soft lapping of the waves. A hundred dollars more, that's all.

Peter

At New Harvest, the natural food co-op, Peter bumped into the real estate agent who'd sold them the house. Nearby, an old man scooped dried fava beans into plastic sack. Someone had set up a stand and was selling local honey. "I don't want to complain, but when we bought the house you didn't say anything about the smell." Peter was wearing the baby in a front facing carrier, and the baby kept reaching back for his chin.

The real estate agent looked hurt. "Are you sure? It's new paint. The house could still be off-gassing. I wouldn't worry too much." He set down his shopping basket. It was filled with green leafy vegetables and those cashews they sell in the little snap-jaw plastic containers. "You

don't look so great. Did something happen?" He put his hand on Peter's shoulder. He seemed genuinely concerned.

"I haven't been sleeping well," Peter said. "A woman came by selling home security. She said there's a lot of crime in our area."

The real estate agent laughed. "That's their job. They have a database of new homeowners. Did she show you her gun?"

Peter nodded.

"Liz Stringer. You wouldn't be the first. She has a shooting range in her living room, you know. We went to high school together. She wore camouflage to her junior prom." The real estate agent gave Peter's shoulder a little squeeze. "If it makes you feel better, I can send someone to come by about the smell. In the meantime, there's a group you might be interested in. For guys like us."

"What kind of group?"

"Kids are tough. It's easy to lose touch with who you are when you're changing diapers all day. I've got four daughters. I haven't used the upstairs bathroom in two months." He dropped a can of black beans into his basket. "You're a stay at home father, right?"

"No, I start work on Monday. Hot tub filtration systems."

"Sales?"

"It' more of a middle-management position." Peter shifted the baby carrier, looked down at his empty cart.

"Perfect. Anyways, these things are all about networking. It's a men's group. Worst case scenario, you'll end up with a hangover."

Maybe the real estate agent was right. It had been awhile since Peter had done anything without Terri. Even before they moved, he'd already lost touch with many of his pre-Henry friends. He took down group the info.

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He needed to clear the weeds and cover the garden with burlap to smother the rest of them out. In the morning, an arborist was coming with fresh woodchips. He'd wake up early, no more sleeping in. Peter leaned his shovel against the tree and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"It's a men's group," he told Terri when she came home. "I won't be out late."

"You sure it isn't a strip club?" She took the bowl from in front of Henry, dropped it in the sink, and ran the hot water.

"Why would you even say that?"

"Because I read, and I know things. They get you there, these men's groups, and the next thing you know you're getting a lap dance from a sixteen year old girl from Uganda and you have to register as a sex offender. It happened to our old school principal." Peter brought the rest of the plates and loaded them into the dishwasher. "I'm just trying to understand: what's so important that you need to leave the house at 7pm on a Wednesday?"

Liz Stringer

In the front lawn of the single-story, red brick home, there was a windmill palm, a white quartz garden, and two knotted hydrangeas. When Liz and Britta bought the foreclosed split-level, the guest bedroom was windowless, and there was water damage in the kitchen. They peeled, painted, and hammered until the fixer-upper became their own, a sanctuary from the outside world.

Liz Stringer suddenly stiffened, afraid to knock. Her handpicked daisy's drooped in the mid-afternoon heat. Why hadn't she put on something nice? Her cargo shorts had visible holes in the side pocket, her hair too shaggy. Maybe she hadn't thought it through. She could still turn around, go back to the car. Leave before humiliating herself, before the door closed one final time. Despite herself, she gathered her courage and knocked.

Britta answered the door in a pink bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel. A cautious smile, guarded warmth. "It's nice to see you," she said. "You look nice." She'd always been good at this—receiving the less fortunate.

"I tried calling. You changed your number."

"Liz, why did you come here? Don't you remember what happened last time?" The crack in the door became a little smaller. Soon Britta would be in her uniform, a badge pinned to her breast. How could she, Liz Stringer, a recovering addict, be with a cop? And after everything. Stuff Liz couldn't even remember.

Just inside, she could see the lemon cream colored paint she and Britta had picked out together, the antique sewing table they'd salvaged from a yard sale, sanded and lacquered.

"I have a few of your things," Britta said. "A bag of clothes in the basement. I took everything else to the Goodwill. I can get it if you want. Stay right here."

As she stood waiting, the sun burning her bare shoulders, sweat accumulating on the waistband of her cargo shorts, Liz Stringer began to sob. Britta, the one person who loved her unconditionally. Britta, who she'd shared this beautiful home with, a home she could never return to.

Rudy

Rudy walked the road's shoulder, past the check cashing place, Chevron, and wig store, the starter pistol tucked into the waistband of his basketball shorts. His fever raged—with every step, he felt closer to some imagined grave—and he hadn't eaten in two days. His pockets were filled with cigarette butts, scratch-offs, and the metal tabs from beer cans.

"Fish sandwich," he said, waving greasy $10 bill at Chick-fil-a cashier.

He took his tray and sat by the window. He didn't want to rob anyone. He didn't want to burgle, steal, defraud, trespass, vandalize, kidnap, or even jaywalk. He only wanted to make the world a better, more hospitable place. He also wanted a puppy, maybe. A French bulldog. He knew where he could steal one.

He laid his head on the tray and fell asleep in a puddle of ketchup.

Liz Stringer

In a gravel alleyway, near the boarded up shopping plaza, in a seedy part of town:

"Are you sure you want to do this, Liz? Because last time, you said that if you asked, to say no."

"You're going to come at me with that?"

"I'm trying to be the bigger person. We're all out here doing our best."

Peter

At the Rusty Hen, a country & western themed bar, where, for five nights a week, a karaoke machine held court, Peter leaned against a pool table. A fog machine blew smoke from the stage and it rolled onto the floor. A Garth Brooks song played through the house PA. He sharpened his cue and tried a bank shot; the five ball ricocheted off the table and rolled across the

floor. He ordered a beer. A dozen guys were saddled up to the bar; they chewed whole peanuts and spat the shells on the ground; they drank lite beer and ordered tater tots from the kitchen. They were little league coaches, carpenters, plumbers, teachers, store owners, cooks—Ronnie, Mick, Hank, Vinnie, etc.

"Do you want to go to the strip club?" one of them asked Peter. "A bunch of us are heading out."

Peter declined.

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There was a competition. Peter was given three golden tipped darts, pointed to a numbered dartboard, and told not to lose them. He hadn't played darts since college. He remembered walking around campus self-consciously, scratching the bug bites on his scalp. A girlfriend had given him lice. His head was far from a perfectly shaped. It was ever-so-slightly pointed, with a flat spot on the crown. He looked like a grape someone had stepped on. They broke up soon after.

As his blue tipped darts bounced ineffectively against the board, Peter thought of Terri and how much she loved the house. He thought of his father, too. HIs father was right, they couldn't sell right now, they'd only lose money.

Liz Stringer

When she was sixteen, Liz Stringer drove around at night in her father's car with a loaded forty-five, daring anyone to cause trouble. She went to the worst neighborhoods—gangs, drugs, violence—but was never afraid.

Peter

Drunk, red-faced, slightly happy, he found his keys in his pocket. But where was his car? He was sure he'd parked there, bumpered up against the brick wall of the Hen. He walked around the block. There was nobody out, yet there was an unsettling feeling. His car had been stolen.

*

"This town is going to hell," the bartender said, while they waited for the police. The bartender was a martial arts expert, male esthetician, and semi-professional poker player. He whipped a comb from his back pocket and swept it through his blonde-frosted tips. "If you ask me, it's time to take back the streets."

"Take them back from who?" Peter asked.

"The blacks. And the whites. And the Latinos."

"From everyone?"

The bartender nudged a whiskey neat in front of him. "Want a pickleback?"

*

He sat the bar, shoulders hunched, body tense. He held the business card between his index and finger and thumb; a bare bulb burned above him; one corner of the card was dogeared, the typography smeared:

Liz Stringer

Integrated Solutions:

Home Security & Installation:

Liz Stringer

Once up a time, Liz drew her gun. She was a spurned lover; it was junior year, midwinter break. The object of her affection was in Legoland with her parents. Liz held the gun with two hands—pop-pop-pop. She shot up the raised vegetable garden, wood splintering, and the flower pots that hung from the rafters. The flower pots whipped up against the porch ceiling like little cowboys in a carnival game; pink petals dusted the ground. She turned over a wheel barrow in the lawn, and kicked it until her foot hurt. She emptied the gun's chamber, reloaded, fired into the house's foundation, but it still stood, it wouldn't topple over.

Now she picked the dry yellow grass, absently tugged at a weed, but the roots wouldn't budge. Should she knock? She knew just what to say.