

Spectators

According to Barrett, the bright light startled him awake.

What the hell!

He rolled to the nightstand and snatched his phone. It lit up to “2:20 Saturday, January 4.”

He raised his arms and spread his hands. They looked white, knuckles out then palms out.

He sat up, turned to the headboard and saw his head and shoulders in silhouette.

What the hell!

He lurched out of bed. Milky light bathed the furniture and spread across the floor. Looking out the window he saw the bright, cold light on a pole at the edge of the road. It was the electric utility pole. It had sprouted a sharp light now casting a green tint on the pavement below it and weak yellow on the lawn near the house. It lit the side of the house, too. *My grass, my house and into MY bedroom!*

The bedroom windows had no pull-down shades. None of the second-floor windows on his house had pull-down shades. *Until now, we didn't need any blinds. Nothing outside could look INTO the windows. Now there's a STREETLIGHT blasting in!*

He rumbled downstairs and outside onto the side deck where he inspected the streetlight. More lights on utility poles glowered farther down the road. Looking up, he could barely make out Orion (“the hunter”) in the southern sky. Orion’s stars seemed weakened and so did the stars near him, his hunting dogs.

Enraged, Barrett couldn't resume sleeping that night. His wife was not there to witness all this, but she would be there the coming weekend.

No one had told him about the streetlights. *Why do we even need streetlights here? There's no sidewalk. Hardly anyone even drives down here, let alone walk.*

The next day he marched up the road to the post office. From behind the counter, through the barred window, Angie told him about the lights.

She told him that Earl Blount, the millionaire businessman, had the lights put up. Well, he gave the money for it. The Civic Association had a meeting to talk about what to do with Mr. Blount's gift of money, and they decided to put up lights on the power poles that ran along the two main roads in the community. The electric power company said it was all right with them, so old Earl Blount's money paid for the lighting equipment and for the contractor the power company hired to put up the lights. Barrett asked Angie if they could turn off the light outside his house. She said she didn't know if they could do that.

Barrett told me all this the next morning. We were in the luncheonette that the Gray family has run here for many years.

"Did you know about this?" he asked me.

I told him the Civic Association had posted notices about the Blount money and had advertised the community meeting to talk about it, but I had not attended the meeting. I learned about the lights later. I told him that a handful of citizens runs the Civic Association and that the rest of us just go along with what they want, especially those of us who aren't old-timers here.

I do know that Earl Blount has a fondness for this community because it's small and unpretentious. I told Barrett that Mr. Blount's family goes way back in another town near here. Earl went off as a young man and earned a pile of money in lumbering and real estate. When he came back, every town but ours had turned their communities over to the tourism industry. Our community is on the mainland far enough from the bridges that run over to the ocean beaches, so tourists don't come here unless they want to see how sorry little southern fishing villages looked in the old days, which is what Earl Blount remembers. Earl Blount gave money for our fire station too.

"So maybe I should go see Earl Blount," Barrett said that morning in the luncheonette.

"What for?" I wondered.

"Tell him to shut off the lights at my place so I can see the stars at night."

"He can't shut them off," I said. Barrett would have to go to the Civic Association, or go see Carl O'Neal or his wife or Sonny Gray. They run the Civic Association.

Barrett works in the city and comes down here with his wife on some weekends and holidays. I'd met them at the luncheonette not long after they bought their place on the bay. I myself had landed here full-time only a few years earlier, after my wife and I retired.

Barrett did go to see Carl and Minnie O'Neal to complain about the light shining into his house at night. It was his first meeting with them. They were cordial enough, but they explained that the community had been hoping to get roadside lights now that more strangers were driving through. The lights were as much for security, they told him, as they were for lighting the way

along the roads. There had been no complaints. And the sheriff's deputy who patrols the area appreciates the lighting.

That was the first Barrett heard about security issues here. *I can't believe that. Security from what?*

O'Neals also told him that they had no authority to turn off the streetlights. Only the power company could do that.

Barrett went out that night to get a closer look.

"I didn't see any power supply line that might accidentally get cut," he told me later. "It looks like that light turns itself on at night and off in the morning."

He said he would take up the matter with the power company. I told him that it's a small local cooperative that runs the electric power here like in many rural towns in the South. "You're a member of the cooperative," I told him. "So you're basically an owner of the power company." He probably didn't understand what I was getting at.

The people at the cooperative office told Barrett that they would need permission from his neighbor to shut off the streetlight, because the light on the power pole also cast light onto the neighbor's place. At the time, Barrett did not know the neighbor, and neither did I. They lived out of town. But at the county offices I did manage to find the property tax record of Mr. Silverman and showed Barrett how to find it as well.

Barrett began a series of protracted and ill-advised attempts to negotiate with Mr. Silverman who eventually warned him to cease and desist further contact. Mr. Silverman sent Barrett a certified letter (copying the electric cooperative and the county Sheriff's Department) prohibiting Barrett's access to his property and to the streetlight.

He wants to keep the damned light on, especially because he's hardly ever there. He says he wants it for security and to protect his property. Security for what? Protect it from what? I need the goddamned protection! That light is trespassing on my place!

One night that winter, when Barrett was alone on a visit to his place on the bay, he got drunk and went outside, gathered rocks from somewhere and hurled them at the streetlight. He had asked me to get drunk with him, which I did. He led me onto his deck to see how the security lights blotted the night sky for the entire community, preventing everyone from seeing a clear view of the stars and other heavenly bodies. I could see his point. Then he asked me to help him heave rocks at the light, which I did not do. I went home, leaving Barrett failing to throw rocks high enough and with enough force to break the light bulb. I probably should have told him my doubts about the idea.

On his drive down one weekend, Barrett pulled into the parking lot of Lucky Strikes, a retail outlet along the highway that he had passed many times on his way here. Lucky Strikes sells gasoline, beer, cigarettes, snacks, bottled water and soda, fireworks, firearms, ammo, lawn ornaments, and lottery tickets. The sign outside says, "Big Stock on Hand." His wife probably wondered why Barrett stopped at Lucky Strikes.

We have pests at the house.

Lucky Strikes asked him what kind of pests, and he told them birds. They asked what kind of birds. Starlings? *Starlings*. They sold him an air rifle that a kid might use, along with a plastic tube of 2,400 BBs.

Barrett had not yet told his wife about his streetlight project. He told her that he had seen starlings swarming around the house. He told her that at night he had seen bats flying around too. And there might be rats at the abandoned Silverman place next door.

Barrett told me all of this sometime later when he again invited me over to get drunk one night. He had come down to his place for the weekend while his wife stayed in the city. I hadn't thought about his problem with the streetlight until he brought it up.

"I tried shooting it out," he said.

"The light?"

"The light."

"Not good," I told him.

He had tried but failed to shoot it out. Evidently his BBs just ricocheted off the streetlight's protective glass. He asked me to go out there with him and try my hand at shooting out the light. I advised him to leave the gun in the house, then we walked out into the night.

Standing in the road under the light, we seemed to be onstage in a spotlight. All we could see was the wooden utility pole, the lighting apparatus above, the pavement below. I looked for insects flying to the light, but there weren't any. It was still winter. It was dark beyond us but we couldn't even see that. For all we knew there could have been spectators out there watching us. If we were intruders, I said to Barrett, we surely would not go near such a spotlight.

"We would snoop around in the shadows," Barrett said and pointed. "Like over there behind Silverman's house."

I stepped out of the pool of light and looked to the sky. As I stepped backward, the stars sharpened and their backdrop blackened. The stars then seemed like spectators who had watched

us while we stood under the spotlight. Out of the spotlight we could see the stars sparkling, but there came a point where we moved under another spotlight farther down the road, and there the sky was smudged again. Then I more sharply understood Barrett's frustration in his bedroom or out on his deck at night where the night sky was no longer as he had known it. He felt out of his element.

Late that spring, Barrett ventured out one night to curse the streetlights. *God damn you god-damned lights!* Even if he had tried, he would not have seen Orion hunting, because by spring Orion had advanced into daylight. But Barrett was on a hunting mission of his own, to take out the streetlight in front of his house.

This time Barrett carried a loaded .22 rifle that he had procured at Lucky Strikes. *We have rats! Rabid raccoons!*

At first, he hid himself in the dark behind Silverman's house, an armed and wary hunter of the night. Then he advanced stealthily to the side of the house and crouched in the azalea bushes. As he crept from the azaleas toward the streetlight, he heard the crack of a gunshot and felt a bullet strike his thigh like a bee sting. He collapsed crying onto the ground. *What the fuck!* Bleeding through his trousers, Barrett gripped his leg and rolled back into the azaleas, hoping to shield himself from the next round of shooting. Terrorized, he wondered whether to show his hands in surrender or stay totally still and just wait it out. He had flung the .22 onto the grass where it lay in the streetlight glow.

He waited it out until he heard no noise anywhere. Then he rolled out of the azaleas and tried to stand and run, but he couldn't because his leg felt numb, so instead he stumbled onto the ground. He clawed his phone from his shirt pocket and pressed the buttons 911.

I saw him at his house a few days later when he was recuperating from the gunshot wound and preparing to drive back to the city to his wife, his house and his job.

He told me that the rescue squad had come to fetch him off the ground that night. One man tended his wound while another drove them to the beach hospital about a half hour away. These were local volunteers in an ambulance van that they had acquired as surplus from a nearby town. The van contains a supply of equipment required for it to meet certain emergency medical standards. It is garaged in the fire station that Earl Blount's money built.

"The siren worked," Barrett said. "They ran it pretty much the whole ride, even though no one was out on the highway that night."

I asked Barrett if he planned to press charges in the shooting.

"They haven't found anyone yet," he said.

I asked if maybe he had shot himself by accident.

"They asked me that too," he said.

But evidently no one, including Barrett, could figure out how he could have used his rifle to shoot himself in the thigh, or why he would shoot himself in the first place.

A shooting suspect never materialized, nor did a bullet of any kind. There wasn't talk at the luncheonette or the post office or anywhere else about who might have shot Barrett. And Barrett himself never heard anything about it. He just dropped the whole thing, for fear of causing himself more trouble.

A few times that summer he kept watch at night from a dark corner of his deck trying to detect a pattern of someone who might consider him an enemy, someone regularly passing by driving or on foot. *We may have an armed stalker. Some pro-light terrorist.* He said he did not carry his .22 or any other weapon during those vigils. And he found that if he backed himself into the corner of the deck on dark and pleasant nights, he could shield himself from the streetlight glare and keep a view northwest toward the sky. There he could see the stars of Boötes, a simple herdsman with his dogs, chasing the great bear, Ursa Major, as if they were offering a sideshow.

“Lisa comes out with me now sometimes,” he told me, referring to his wife.

I replied, “Maybe she’s relieved that you don’t carry guns around out there.”

“She’s relieved that I don’t complain as much,” Barrett said, then added, “but, you know, it’s perfectly okay to carry guns around out here. They expect you to carry guns here.”

“To stand your ground,” I agreed.

We ourselves were standing on the deck in the dark, except for the light cast by the infernal streetlight.

“Well,” Barrett said wistfully, “I did stand my ground out there.”

He continued, “I carried a legal and loaded weapon against any and all trespassers, and I still got shot.”

“Did you even shoot back in self-defense?” I wondered. I couldn’t remember the details of his shooting mishap.

He reminded me that he dropped the gun while fleeing the shooter to seek cover.

“At least he didn’t shoot again to finish you off,” I said.

Barrett reflected on the scene from the previous winter, then said, “And he probably *could* see me lying there in Silverman’s bushes, because of that damned light.”

He reflected some more, then said, “Some security light that is. Allows me zero protection. There is no place out there where I could safely stand my ground anyway. I might as well be on display for everyone to see.”

As it happened, serendipity led Silverman to place his house on the market. Again after protracted negotiation Barrett and his wife agreed on a price with Silverman and bought the neighboring property. And soon enough the electric cooperative cut off the streetlight at Barrett’s request. Now when I go down there I think of when Barrett was fighting the streetlight, and how he can look up into the night sky now and see stars.