

Knuckle Dragger

Jay, armored but with a laundry basket, trapped with his wife in their downstairs bedroom, leaned his bare shoulder against the closed and, for some reason, locked door readying himself to charge into the kitchen and flush the bat that had made their space its preferred sleeping home for the second time in as many weeks. Ryan, safe beneath the pillowed comforter which stretched toward the ceiling like a peopled teepee as she sat upright in their bed, tapped a series of keystrokes to research what support she could offer given that risking her body against the flying beast was not within the scope of her bravery.

“People are saying the best you can do is open the windows and turn on lights so that it flies away on its own.”

“How is it getting in the house in the first place? And why?” Jay asked.

“I’m afraid the Internet doesn’t have all the answers,” his wife said.

When they had relocated here to the Nebraska Sandhills, they’d coined it their great adventure. Together, they’d endured their elitist East Coast friends’ mocking around the same tired japes about failing to fully fly over a fly-over state or wondering aloud about the couple’s ability to work their mouths around a Midwestern accent while also chewing on straw. Even as

the two of them knew their stature had shrunken amongst those purported to love them just as they were, in each other and their shared experience of this state—which promised “The Good Life” on the signs set at the border—they had everything they wanted. Jay simply never considered that this brave new endeavor would require such intimacy with bats—an animal that could fit in the cupped creases of his palm yet still inspired within him a primitive fear that based his blood in alkali. It was the wings—stretched and membranous, flapping with a hot metabolic energy to keep a mammal that belonged on the ground aloft instead.

“Okay,” Jay said, and he pushed a breath from his chest out through his lips, “here I go.”

“Don’t die.”

He opened the door and closed it again behind him just as swiftly; better he faced the creature alone than allow another of its wingbeats to worry a wisp of hair at his wife’s ear as had woken her up earlier. Jay did not yet trust his own memory of the layout of their new house; what cluster of boxes waited underfoot to catch an unsuspecting shin he could not say. He preferred tripping and falling, however, to remaining a stationary target, so he ran to the light switch on the other side of the kitchen and flicked it on. He dared not stop now. Riding his momentum, he dashed into the dining room, the back wall prepped by Ryan for imminent repainting, and jukeed around the cluttered table revealed in part by the slatted starlight that shone with a luminosity each impossible, clear night here on the plains where pollution—of people, of noise, of light—found no purchase. The heavy thunk of the push-button light switch turned to sunny yellow all that had been black, threaded through with silver, before.

He heard no coded clicking of echolocation. He saw no bat. Jay ran on.

The yawning window of the living room made seeing all the easier, so he skirted the low coffee table and saved his vulnerable knee from another knock. He used this advantage to hurry

across the foyer and into what would eventually be Ryan's workout room, and through his trailing wake beamed all the lights the house could offer—even the porch light glowed from outside the front door. Initially, he had found the three separate entrances to the bathroom—one each from the dining room, workout room, and bedroom—to be a bizarre and unnecessary early twentieth century design quirk. As he finished his lap around their new home, retrofitted over the decades from its original employ as a general goods store in 1917, Jay blessed the third door as he shut it behind him and leaned over the clawfoot tub to rest.

“I got all the downstairs lights turned on,” he said as he returned to the Ryan-shaped protuberance in their bed exactly where he'd left her.

“My hero,” she said.

“Did you find any more tips on how to deal with our flying friends?”

“Yes, actually. I was on this interesting thread that suggested using a tennis racquet. Apparently, bats' radar can't pick up the strings, so, to them, it looks like there's nothing there.”

“It seems a bit cruel to swat them like that though.”

“You're not supposed to swing for a baseline winner. The people who posted said you just give them a gentle bop right on the nose which is enough to stun them. Then you just walk them outside, and they're none the worse for wear.”

“Okay,” Jay said. “Then I suppose I'll invest in a tennis racquet. My backhand could use some work anyhow.”

“I have more interesting news,” Ryan said. “We got our genealogy results back.”

“You were checking email while I was out there risking my life?”

“Correct,” Ryan said. “The blue light of screens keeps me calm during high anxiety situations.” A sequence of clicks floated through the down alternative as she accessed the

information she wanted to share. “They sent just the snapshot findings. The more detailed informational packet is still to come. But there are already some interesting tidbits.”

“Like what?” Jay asked.

“It appears there is fairly substantial Nordic influence within my family line which is surprising. My father always said our ancestors originated from western Europe. There is a bit of Welsh on my graph, so he wasn’t outright lying to me. But the Nordic slice of my DNA pie would swallow Wales whole.”

“How about me? Do I have Viking blood too?”

“You’re a mongrel,” Ryan said.

“That’s hurtful.”

“The graph doesn’t lie, my love. Your heritage is spread all over multiple continents, and that means your ancestors weren’t picky. You even have some Neanderthal blood running through you.”

“What?”

“Yep,” Ryan said. “A little more than two percent of your DNA is consistent with Neanderthal DNA.”

“Neanderthal.” Jay repeated the word as he noticed he no longer carried the laundry basket. It lay somewhere in the wilds of the house belonging now to the dominion of the bat.

“Like a caveman.”

“That’s a bit reductive,” his wife said. “Neanderthal was likely nomadic. They had to follow the resources to stay alive.”

“But some of them lived in caves.”

“At least some of the time, yes, but so did Cro-Magnon.”

“So do bats,” Jay said.

Neanderthal, that vanished human subspecies, had not vanished at all. They lived on through him, worming their way into his very skeletal system, piggybacking like a parasite through his bloodstream. Jay felt hijacked—and by a prehistoric evolutionary derelict no less.

Ryan, hair frazzled and statically charged, appeared out from under the blanket. “When you turned on all those lights,” she said to him, “did you also get the windows open?”

Jay moved silently to the other bedroom door where he’d began his sprint as he heard his wife utter a sorrowful moan before ducking back beneath the comforter and the security it provided. He readied himself for a second lap but could not shake the feeling that the bones in his legs were now shorter, stockier—his nostrils wider to warm the air he breathed. He hurried out of the bedroom, wishing for a stick and flame to drive away that which had not mastered fire.

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He awoke changed. The spheroid of his head elongated toward the back of his skull while the ridge of his now prominent brow cascaded over his eyes. His hips had widened, his chin had shriveled, and hair had spread over swaths of his body as if in response to geologic time winding backwards to a colder Pleistocene climate. In the face of his transformation in which evolution had geared the mammalian machine into reverse, Ryan remained untroubled.

“You’re getting older,” she said to him from over his shoulder which sloped away from his neck under the pull of denser bones. “Your body is going to continue to change. Mine will too. We’re only human.”

“You are,” he said. “I’m just a subspecies.” She laughed off his comment as she dragged her hand through the thicket of hair at the nape of his neck before sitting down on the toilet to leave him with his own reflection. He turned his head one way then the other and back again, but

no angle changed the creature he'd become. There was human in the eyes but far too much ape in the rest of the face. "You should call animal control to come haul me away."

Ryan laughed again then flushed. "Maybe they could do a sweep for the bat while they're here." She moved him aside so she could wash her hands, and she sucked through her teeth as the bracing water from the sink rinsed over her skin. "Can I come with you to the store? I want to see about getting a tarp to put down over the floor when I paint the dining room."

"Of course," Jay said. "I shouldn't be allowed alone in public like this anyhow." He pointed to his own face. Ryan shook her head and used the hair on his back to dry her hands.

An hour later when they walked into Falling Pheasants Sporting Goods, Jay was still trying to squirm out from under the touch of his ill-fitting clothes. No cotton shirt had been sown to accommodate this thickened trunk of his from which draped shortened arms that appeared to have given up before they were done growing. And the hair. Knotting, tangling stuff stitching itself into the geography of his un-calloused skin that had never known the wiry touch of hair before, digging into him with the headache insistence of a tongue probing the new, raw hole where a tooth had once rooted. Could he have gone naked, he would have.

"I'll meet you back here in a bit," Ryan said. As Jay nodded, what sounded from him was little more than a grunt.

He tugged at his sleeves, pulled at his collar, and walked too near an intricate pyramid of carefully balanced golf balls that scattered in a terrific collapse; they click-clacked off the tile in leaping bounds and rolled away as a hundred dimpled trip hazards sown like seeds in the field of Pheasants.

"I'm sorry," Jay said to the associate who arrived on scene.

“It’s our own fault,” the man said. “As soon as we were done with it, I knew we’d built it too close to the aisle. Don’t worry about, sir. This is our mess to clean up.”

“I could help. My brain is actually bigger than that of modern humans.”

“I,” the man looked around for help that was not coming, “don’t doubt that, but it’s okay. Let us take care of this. Just please watch your step.”

Several golf balls trickled past Jay’s feet, and the absurdity of his shoes became as worrisome as the shirt that harried his torso even as he stood still. Bending down on chocked knees, he pulled the bows of his laces and left his shoes behind as his padding feet carried him deeper into the cavernous store.

He remembered he was here for a reason, but that reason fragmented in his memory when he found a street hockey starter set complete with a goal. Using his capable hands, he pulled the plastic framework apart and, with the help of the bladed sticks cross-thatched at the top and bottom, reoriented the pieces into a tanning rack. Jay splayed like skins left to dry in the sun a short-sleeve compression workout shirt and black yoga pants with a zebra print waistband. Inside a rock ring built of kettlebells, he placed a kerosene lamp to provide warmth and community. After knocking over the display model of a stand punching bag whose plastic base had not yet been filled with the requisite ballast of sand, Jay wheeled it over to the temporary encampment that would be home for as long as the cooling weather and migratory game allowed.

He sat breathing the recirculated, conditioned air. The rocks around his fire might have made fine Levallois cores if only he had a knapping stone. For now, however, he was content, and he reveled in the rarity of such pleasant rest.

“Jay?” Ryan, his mate, said to him. She stood amongst several other Cro-Magnons—each frailer than the last. “What are you doing?”

He was doing what he and his kind had always done, what he and his kind would always do. “Surviving,” he said.

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With warmth on his skin and his belly filled with food, an easy sleep spirited him away to a dreaming place where the pachyderms were wooly and the cats smiled with sabre teeth. Snowmelt soaked the valley into a soupy bog, but the earth-rich smell of the primordial ooze heralded the coming bounty of prey items and plant life that would, at last, end the cruelty of the starving season. Jay dreamed the most heartening dream his paleolithic brain could provide; he dreamed the dream of plenty.

“Jay, wake up.” His mate’s surprising strength rocked the mass of his well-muscled body from side to side until the ethers of his sleep winked away and he located his waking self within the time and place he existed. “I think the bat is in here again.”

He did not hesitate. Throwing off the blanket to pile another layer of protection atop Ryan, he barreled to the light switch, and, in the sudden illumination of the constellation of four high-efficiency thirteen-watt bulbs, the black figure of the bat fluttered from the light and out the door to the secrecy of darkness. Jay loped in pursuit wielding the 4-iron plucked from his golf bag stored in the open closet. In the kitchen, his vision still spotted from the previous flash in the bedroom, but he could hear the tiny beast as it flew consistent circles somewhere above his head, probing for the path out of danger Jay knew did not exist. He stepped forward when the time was right and cleaved the air with his club over his head and down, but he received no feedback except when the heel of his iron bounced off the solidity of the kitchen’s wood floor.

He felt the animal’s frantic flight, so he continued the chase into the dining room. A delicate box packed with squatting vials of nail polish—high-risk reds and gumball blues,

flirtatious pinks and violent yellows—crashed into the baseboards after Jay sent it skipping across the room. He pivoted into the very backhand he knew needed practice and shattered a window out into the Nebraska night. He frothed at the hunt as he closed down on his quarry that would find no quarter, no escape. Jay's next swing clipped the bulb in a wall sconce, and the starburst glass showered the floor like the opening salvo of a Midwestern ice storm the locals had warned him to expect when winter came back home. Away from the windows the bat flew, so he pursued to the back wall, punching a first then second then third hole into the drywall that needed paint as he hewed with his club that consistently hit errant shots on the course but consistently missed panicking bats in a house.

Jay staggered through the paint cans—the tops of each dabbed with a sample drop of the color called Soil—and sent gallons flooding across the floor as he lashed with his club again and again. He plodded through paint and glass. He roared. He raged.

The dining room lights clicked on.

Together, he at one end of the room and Ryan at the other watched the bat take three easy strokes of its miraculous wings and fly out the broken window to safety.

While heaving his breath from his furred stomach, Jay's throat—blown wide open by the caustic adrenaline stripping his veins from the inside—caught phlegm at the back. He hacked and spat the sticky glob into the spreading Soil. Ryan came to him through the catastrophe of their dining room, but then she knelt near his feet and dipped both her palms into the paint. She pushed past him and printed her hands against the punctured wall then drew with fingertips, pressing into place three glyphs. When she stood back at his side, her pictures told the story.

At one edge, the stick-figure her with two sloping lines representing her long hair ending in curling upticks. At the other, an impossibly huge bat with empty eyes and a roaring mouth

spiked with ghoulish teeth. And in between the two, club held high above his head, Jay stood. He turned to her—his shortened stature putting his eyes in line with her own—with what smile his face could manage and hoped she knew how completely he loved her for the mate she was. She put her painted hands to either side of his face to hold him through the bristled beard he did not have the day before.