

The Master Plan

Even though we live way out here in the woods, we're not rednecks, so we don't have a gun, but I'm wishing we did. That is not because I'm alone in our house with half a swim team's worth of shrieking kids and a 150-pound bloodhound in heat while my husband is away on business for a few days. Don't let the fact that a minute ago I was yelling at the top of my lungs or that I suddenly can't stop crying and get a grip on myself fool you. I mean, it's not like I accidentally moved out of the capital and back to the West Virginia Mountains. All these babies didn't just fly out of my ears when I wasn't looking, and my raven-haired daughters who look like a living flow chart of one gorgeous girl's growth were only screaming because they were too euphoric to contain themselves. And you can hardly blame the dog because her body's begging for babies. I can sure as hell relate to that! So I may be a little crazed, but joyously so. I have not taken leave of my senses. It's just that when something goes so seriously wrong, you find out fast that no matter how much you oppose the death penalty, the state of our jails, the socioeconomic causes of criminal deprivation, and inflicting violence on others for any reason at all, your coffeehouse principles are not so much help in protecting your brood as a big-ass shotgun would be, but at a time like this it's a little late to be having that epiphany and right on time to be cursing any god who would endanger a woman and kids whose dog very nearly outweighs the lot of them combined like this.

If I had a minute to think about something besides how the hell to get us all out of here alive, I would tell you how proud I am that my house, which stretches from our driveway so that it looks like a dark green caterpillar waiting to gobble up any truck that might come near it, is in a state of creative chaos like this from the time we collect eggs at sunup to the time we carve a pathway through the day's rubble and collapse into our huge family bed at night to sleep because

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we must. My husband makes good money doing something with computers, so why on earth would I want to work? So stupid people could drive me crazy and I could toil uselessly all day long and nauseum? I'm just as happy to play freeze tag and build forts, thank you very much. I don't generally miss the kind of casual adult interaction you are constantly subjected to in the city, and until this moment it suited me just fine that I can't see a neighbor or passing traffic from any window of my home that in some sort of apparently misguided delusional peace-love hippy phase we decided not to install locks on.

In the moment before I realized what was happening, I was shouting "Two hands, Rhoda! Thank you, Emily!" over Bear's lowing and attempts to scratch a hole through our bathroom door. Of course I would prefer not to have a randy dog pent up in my bathroom, but there are packs of wild mutts that roam through our woods at night, and despite what my girls might tell you, we don't need puppies right now.

Tonight is unusually cool for mid-July, and our windows are open. Drove of bugs bludgeon themselves against our screens.

Rhoda, my four year old, takes a freshly sterilized Mason jar from the towel on the floor where they are laid out and gives it to Emily. Emily presents it to me with the exaggerated care of a two year old who recognizes her job as by far the most difficult and important part of the process. Taking similar precautions so as not to scald my infant son Hank, who is nestled against my chest in a baby carrier, I ladle homegrown-blackberry jelly from the huge steel pot on the stove into the jar, remove the funnel, wipe the rim of the jar with a damp rag and hold it firmly on the counter while my five year old, Sylvie, screws a sterilized lid on and sets the jar upside down with the others to help it form a seal. We rehearsed this procedure many times, but

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you have to finish once you start lest you waste the literal fruits of your labors, so I am narrating the procedure again and again, shouting to be heard over the din.

I am about to take a jar from Emily's outstretched hands when I glance at Sylvie to make sure that she has got the jelly sealed okay, and I see a twinkling over her right shoulder. It can only be one thing, and suddenly each particle of the air itself seems to be weighted and sucking through pin pricks in my lungs, into a black hole behind them. I can't see straight. I drop the ladle on the floor and start crying.

Unless you have lived in such an isolated area, you do not really know what dark as night means. Inside, the house is brightly lit. In fact, if there was time to stop right here and take a tour of our house, you would see that when you open the front door and step into the kitchen, then walk down the hall and peek into the kids' playrooms and then the bathroom where Bear is enduring her confinement on the left and our large family room and utility room on the right and finally end up in our bedroom and second bathroom at the end of the hall opposite the kitchen, every overhead light in the house is on, but standing in my yard when it's cloudy like now, and the moon and stars are obscured, you can't see your hand in front of your face. You look out the window and see nothing. The twinkling cannot be a lamp in a neighbor's window, a passing car, or a streetlight because none of those things are visible from my yard even in the middle of the day.

I don't want to face what's happening, so I wonder for a moment whether we can get the last of the jelly into jars before the light gets the rest of the way up the driveway, and then for a second I consider whether I might be able to wake myself up, but there is not time to try, and I know full well I'm awake and completely alone with my children, who I am about to have to defend with a kitchen knife from the stranger creeping the quarter mile up my driveway because

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I love humanity too much to buy a gun and lock my doors like any goddamn reasonable fucking person would.

Every new mother has at least a nebulous plan of action for protecting her child and self from whichever of her nightmares might seep out of her pores and attack them. This plan relies mostly on proximity to a telephone, the idiotic fantasy that one will be able to keep one's baby who is oblivious to the threat at hand silent and successfully hidden from the intruder, and the story we all heard as children about a mother who lifted a car which had run over her child. Somehow this woman's maternal love overwhelmed her body and, although she was sore the next day, enabled her to perform this miracle -- to lift a car with one hand and pluck her somehow shaken, not squished, child out from under it with the other. But a mother such as I am who knows that there is no one to call, that their pleas for help would shrink to whispers and die in the woods before they could possibly find a human ear to tickle, spends her nights strategizing, preparing more carefully, and I did so frequently laying in bed at night suckling Sylvie, and then Rhoda. Once Emily came along I was so tired a meteor could have hit the house and I wouldn't have batted an eye, but it was okay because I already had a system all worked out. I'll tell you something, though: no matter how much time you spend trying not to imagine such gruesome scenarios, it's not the same when they happen, and you can't lift a car even when all of your lives depend on it.

In your mind there's a way out; you can think fast, run faster; react with lightening speed. You are strong enough. You find the strength. Right now though, I can't even remember what I planned to do, so I start racing around my kitchen like a lizard in a tank of hot water, thinking about how to fight this asshole without jostling Hank too much and whether I should give each girl an apple to put in her pocket now so that they'll have something healthy to eat while they

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wait for someone to discover them after I am killed. I don't want to upset them, so I try to explain that I am sobbing hysterically and running in circles because I have burned myself, but I don't think it's working because they're starting to cry too. I think of being pinned to the floor, clawing at this horrible man putting his hands on me. Despite all my preparing, I cannot escape the fact that I am a small woman, easily overpowered, and there is almost no chance that I will be able to fight him off. And even if my door was dead-bolted and my windows locked, these are small deterrents to a person who wants to come inside. Even a child can break a pane of glass.

Finally I manage to remember my plan.

I don't want the man to know that I have seen him or be able to see us anymore, so I leave the lights on, but drop to the floor. I wipe my nose on my sleeve and choke down my tears as fast as I can, and then hiss to my children, "Everyone into the bedroom -- RUN!"

They are confused and frightened, but I am clearly not kidding, so Sylvie and Rhoda move fairly quickly. This is all too much for Emily, who is now crying with utter abandon, and whose body has gone limp and appears to be melting onto the floor. I steady Hank's head with my left hand and grab her like a football under my right arm, moving as fast as I can on my knees.

Once I have closed the bedroom door and set Emily down I grab Sylvie. I try to appear calm, but my hands are shaking and I know that I don't have long before the intruder reaches our front door. "Please try to stop crying for a minute and listen to me. I need you to be in charge now. Help your sisters do what I tell you and take care of Hank for a minute. This is very important, Sylvia." I give her Hank and tell them all to lie down next to the bed and not move. To stay away from the windows. When the stranger gets as far as the front yard -- is about to

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come in the door -- I'll lift my children out the bedroom window and tell them to run like hell down the driveway to the road and keep going until they find a car. It is my hope that he will not see them, or, if he does, will let them go and attack me instead. I close the door and crawl back to the kitchen.

And then it hits me that I am being a nut. I tell myself to stop being so fucking crazy. I almost start laughing out loud. Things like this don't really happen to you. I am tired. I am imagining things. I have to stop this. It is probably some poor person -- a woman probably -- who ran out of gas or got a flat tire or something, and is probably scared out of her wits coming up here to ask for help from god knows who. I suddenly feel so sorry for her, imagining the bile in her throat as she tries to be brave, that I want to run to this weary traveler and take her in my arms. I throw open the front door and call to her so she can stop being frightened.

"Can I help you?"

But the light goes out.

Over the din of the tree frogs and crickets, I hear gravel crunching under this man's suddenly fast heavy footsteps.

I slam the door and grab a knife from the block by the stove. I am running as fast as I can to the bedroom, trying not to vomit from fear. My hall is four feet wide instead of the standard three, and 47 feet long. The floor looks like hardwood, but is actually strips of bamboo. It is strong enough to withstand any natural disaster short of a massive panda attack. As I approach the bathroom, I remember Bear and it occurs to me that I will never be able to hoist her out the window with the kids, and I actually panic not knowing what to do to save her -- as if this is the only flaw in my rock-solid plan -- before I realize that she can probably fight the man off long enough to give me the time I need to get my kids out the window, and maybe I can go with them.

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Maybe she will follow us when it is safe. I hear the man's footsteps on the porch and the house shakes when the door slams back against the wall. I fling open the bathroom door as I run past, and although I do not stop or look back, I hear Bear's toenails click on the floor for the split second that they touch the ground as she gallops to the front door and jumps on the man standing in the threshold of our home, knocking him back down the steps. The man's curses pierce through Bear's growls and snarls; he is obviously hurt, but it is not at all clear how long I have until he breaks free.

My girls hear Bear too, but have no idea what's going on, so when I reach the bedroom door the girls are up. Sylvie is trying to prevent Rhoda and Emily from rushing to their doggie's aid. Hank is still on the floor weeping. I drop the knife, open the window, and grab Sylvie, giving her directions as I prepare to lower her down when I hear what sounds like a freight train barreling towards us through the woods. I scoop up Hank, hug my girls to me, and wait for it to pass, listening to the two dozen or so mongrels fall in line behind Bear, and thus the intruder, as she chases him deeper and deeper into the woods.

Laughing through my tears, I shepherd my frazzled brood quickly out the front door and into the car, resolving to drive until I find a 24 hour hardware store where I can buy a deadbolt for our front door and a steak for our dog. Forty miles away, in the dusty parking lot of the closest sheriff's office, I cover my kids with kisses and tell them they can each have a puppy.