

## The Vigil

Mayor Skinner telephoned me Sunday evening, and after I put the phone down I called the family together. The next morning, on the way to work, I stopped at the sheriff's office. He handed over the badge, the gray nylon mask, the shoulder holster — I had to take off my suit jacket to strap it on — but he paused before giving me the revolver.

“Know how to use this?”

“A Smith and Wesson 625? Yes, I've handled one before.”

I told him how, back in the winter of 2004, during the rioting, seven men from our subdivision — Goldenwood Estates — had formed a militia. Just in case. Course, the disruption hadn't spread hereabouts, but if the Democrats *had* stolen the presidency, it would have provided an excuse for them to confiscate weapons nationwide. Or try to. So most weekends we, the men in our subdivision, would ride out to Proctor National Forest, where Al Davies had a hunting camp, and we'd do military maneuvers. We didn't pop away at tin cans, either. Bob Gleason — thirty years in the Marines — ran the show. We all brought our personal weapons, and Bob brought his arsenal for us to practice with. The 625 had been one of those guns.

The sheriff chuckled. “Colonel Bob, eh? Well, if *he* trained you, you know what you're doing,” and he handed me the pistol. The rubber stock felt both soft and very solid. Six inch barrel, .45 caliber bore. And in the chamber were six bullets. I thought of them as silver bullets, to be meted out with the greatest care.

Vigilante! Me! Driving to work, I looked at the world anew. The old lady jaywalking, as if her senility gave her special rights. A bunch of loud black girls leaving a trail of litter. The Grand Am ahead changing lanes without a signal. But — here's the important thing — I viewed it all with benevolence. As Vigilante I had been granted a Godlike power. I understood what my role was: To uphold the moral underpinnings of society. A Godlike power gave one a Godlike perspective. My only worry was that I'd know when the time came for thunderbolts.

That I'd been entrusted with this role was both humbling and an honor. I was our city's ninth Vigilante since the position had been established, after the election troubles. When the dust settled — rioting over, Bush and Cheney back in office, the Supreme Court solidly affirming states' rights — we, the silent majority, could feel that we had taken our country back, at least in some enclaves. We didn't intend to relinquish it. When the mayor called he said, “Things getting lax out there, Ken. Need to get folks back in line.” Then he offered me the Vigilante position, which had been dormant for over half a year. Suddenly the circumstances of my life — which to some may seem pedestrian — took on their true significance: A lifetime of making an honest living, paying taxes; twenty-three years married to Audrey; two fine children, Ronnie, age eight, and Sherry (“Pumpkin”) age fourteen; elder at my church; homeowner who kept his sidewalks edged and shrubs trimmed. Small matters? No, it was a way of life, a set of values, and I'd been selected to defend it. The pistol pressing against my side was hard proof of my worth.

My benevolent mood continued through the work day. When, at lunch, the young waiter put a lukewarm bowl of split pea soup before me, I smiled when I explained the problem; and when he returned with the soup after the entree had been served, I simply waved it away; and when the bill came and I saw that I had been charged for the soup, I spoke to him in a kindly manner. His punishment would be nothing more severe than a nickel tip. I gazed at his young face — stupid rather than defiant or malicious — with indulgence. I mention this incident only

because it touches on that persistent worry I had, ever since Sunday's phone call. How would I know when it was time to use my gun — to carry out my duty? The mayor had said that I would simply *have a feeling*, and to trust in it. When I was driving back to work I wondered, in the case of this waiter, what could precipitate such a feeling. And I imagined catching him — he would be behind a partition, thinking he was unobserved — as he let a gob of spit fall into my food. And, yes, I *could* feel it, even driving in my car; it was like a tremor going through my body. With this action he would move beyond the merely personal and become a malignant social danger.

Before I left work I called Audrey, to check if she needed something, and she asked me to stop at the grocery store and get an avocado.

We have a brand spanking new strip mall near our subdivision, with an Albertson's, a Baskin-Robbins, a Blockbuster Video. Pristine it is, and perhaps that had a part in what happened next. As I walked across the parking lot a pickup truck, fire engine red, its double chrome exhausts roaring, pulled up to the curb and came to a stop in front of a sign that said "Fire Zone — No Stopping." The truck had huge oversize wheels. I looked up at the windshield; in big letters of glittery silver were the words "Born To Be Bad." Behind the windshield was an arrogant young male face.

One fact overwhelmed all others. Music was blaring from the truck. Rap. I could actually feel the booming bass beat reverberating through the soles of my shoes.

As I passed in front of the truck I caught the boy's eye. I put my hands over my ears. He grinned at me and put *his* hands over *his* ears. He widened his eyes, mocking me, and in that very instant I was able to decipher the words being rapped out. Obscenities. I slowed, listened. The song was apparently a description of vile sexual acts, all preceded by the words "How I did her, what I did." And in that instant I *did* know.

Yes, I thought with grim certainty, you were Born To Be Bad.

I continued past the truck, and when my back was to him I took the mask out of my pocket and slipped it over my head. I pulled the gun from the holster and wheeled around.

The bullet caught him on the side of the head and he vanished from sight — no seat belt, I thought calmly. I was calm. I heard screams, saw people scurrying this way and that. A full shopping cart, abandoned, wobbled across the parking lot, finally hitting a curb and toppling over. I opened the door of the truck, stepped on the running board and clicked off the ignition key. The obscenities stopped; blessed silence. The boy — no longer grinning, I suppose — was face down on the passenger seat, which had a spreading stain of red.

I got out. I saw people peering from doorways, crouching behind cars. I put the pistol on the hood of the truck, then took out the badge and held it high.

"Vigilante, folks," I called out. "I'm the new Vigilante."

Soon a crowd had gathered around me, staring at my masked face. They seemed to be waiting for something.

"Too loud," I said. Then I gestured toward the windshield of the truck and shrugged in regret. "Too bad."

When I entered my house thirty minutes later, the TV reporter was comparing my four words to the terse utterances of Clint Eastwood in "Dirty Harry." Which just happens to be my all-time favorite movie.

Ronnie was bonkers. He had his plastic Uzi and was bouncing on the sofa in an ecstasy of pride.

"Pop! Let me see it, the gun!"

I removed my jacket but wouldn't let him handle the revolver. "Not now, son," I said, a bit sternly. Audrey gave me a kiss on the cheek; I felt her hand linger over the bulging holster.

We watched the news coverage. As per the guidelines regulating the Vigilante Program, I wasn't identified in any way. A photograph of the victim was shown, the arrogant grin once more in place. He was a senior in neighboring Tisdale, a wide receiver on the football team.

"One shot! Right in the side of the head." Ronnie toppled sideways on the sofa.

Then the news switched to a national story — and there he was, His Honor, the newly-elected mayor of New York, Bill Clinton. If a bloated tick could grin, it would look like Slick Willie. When he started talking, hee-hawing like a donkey, I got up and went into the kitchen.

His Honor. Where was justice in this world?

I took the top off a skillet. Pork chops and slices of potato simmered in a sea of onions.

In the living room I heard Ronnie ferreting out and destroying evil. Course he was proud of his old pop. Not so his sister. Last night, when I told the family about my Vigilante role, Sherry had rolled her teenage eyes. "Oh God, Dad. Couldn't you have just said no?" Later that night, lying in bed, I had thought of the perfect answer: "It's because of you, Pumpkin, that I had to say yes." I remembered the music blaring from the truck, the vile acts being rapped out.

Audrey came into the kitchen.

"I forgot the avocado," I said.

"I'll forgive you this time."

I sat at the kitchen table. "Any news?" Might as well get it over with.

"No. She called. She thinks the treatment is working."

End of discussion.

Audrey's widowed mother, seventy-six years old, continuing her year and a half search for a cancer cure. First came conventional treatments, which I could understand. But when those failed she had begun seeking out every exorbitantly expensive quack remedy in the world. And I do mean the world. She'd been to Sweden and Switzerland and was presently at a spa outside Oaxaca, Mexico, getting shark cartilage injections. Obscene, it was, this grasping to stay alive. At any cost. The considerable estate her husband had left her was withering away like her body. Which would be depleted first? When your time comes, I say, step aside with some dignity.

I make a more than decent living, but with two kids to put through college an inheritance would help. The selfishness . . . I thought of those bumper stickers you sometimes see on the cars of oldsters: "I'm spending my grandchildren's inheritance." Announcing their selfishness to the world. As if proud of it!

Ronnie appeared in the doorway and laid down a barrage of gunfire. As he darted past I caught his arm.

"Whoa, partner. You and me, we need to have a powwow."

I stood up.

"Where's Sherry?"

"Dance team practice. She should be home any minute."

Ronnie and I sat Indian-style on the floor of his bedroom, a room littered with evidence of the mercurial mind of a child, one moment engrossed in a Mortal Kombat video game, the next tossing a foam basketball at the goal I had attached to his closet door. A normal kid, a good kid.

And now he looked at me with eyes like saucers.

"One bullet," he said, wonderingly, "Right in the — "

I held up a hand, all solemnity.

“No, son. That’s not how you should see what happened. What happened was a tragedy. I suppose you could say it was a tragedy of upbringing. The newscaster said the boy was eighteen. Already a full-blown threat to society — I could see that in his eyes. No respect for anything, at least not anything of value. Maybe respect for that band he was playing on his stereo.”

My mind flashed, for an unpleasant instant, to Sherry’s room, its walls covered with posters of rock stars — tattooed, pierced freaks with bare chests strutting around a stage of chaos, guitars thrusting upward.

“Listen, Ronnie, for a society to function properly it must rest on a set of values, and for me the good old Christian values will do just fine, thank you very much. Someone like that boy — well, it’s like a dog with rabies, it has to be killed. I did what I had to do — I took no pleasure in firing that shot. It was a duty, a grim one I’ve been assigned. Ronnie, I’ll be happy if I don’t have to fire this gun again, if I can return it Sunday with five bullets in the chamber. But if I have to I’ll fulfill the duty my community has entrusted me with. And if you want to be proud of your old pop, be proud that I’ve lived the type of life that allowed me to be selected as Vigilante. That’s what *I’m* proud of — humbled by. And — oh, yeah — proud that I’ve brought up a son who’ll never turn out like that thug in the truck.”

I tousled his hair. He smiled shyly and spoke hesitantly.

“Say, Pop . . . Could I hold it?”

I took the gun out of its holster, handed it to him.

“It’s heavy,” he said, in awe.

Next he wanted me to put on the mask. It’s gray nylon, elastic, with two narrow slits. I slipped it on, and Ronnie’s eyes widened even more, now with a trace of fear. I had looked at myself in a mirror at my office and had been surprised at what I saw. The mask blunts the features, turning the face into an anonymous assemblage of bumps and hollows. There’s something reptilian about it, especially the eyes behind those two slits. As if lurking there.

When we returned to the living room Sherry was coming in the door, carrying her gym bag, her hair still damp from the shower she had taken at school. This summer she had occasionally invited the other girls from the dance team to use our pool. Course, the dance team is made up of only the cream of the crop, which I can attest to — my bedroom window overlooks the pool — and I couldn’t help but imagine, for a moment, the crowded shower, steam, lathering soap, girls’ voices raised. . . .

“Hey, Sher, didya hear, didya hear?” Ronnie blathered out the story about the shooting.

“Oh, God, not that dumb Vigilante thing.”

I looked at my wife, standing in the kitchen door. I spread my hands, palms up, pleadingly. “Where’s my Pumpkin?” My voice rose in terror. “And, Audrey, what are those pods doing in the back yard?”

Humor — to cover the pain. The joke being that my little girl, who used to fling herself into my arms at every opportunity, had recently — overnight, it seemed — been replaced by an alien. An all-disapproving, eye-rolling alien that now stomped up the stairs.

Audrey often assured me of the normalcy of what was happening. “When will she become human again?” I would ask. “Soon, soon.” And she’d point out the positives — Sherry got good grades, she associated exclusively with the children of the best families. No tattoos, no nose rings.

I did know, deep down, that Sherry had solid, conservative, Christian values. But it still

hurt when, at dinner, she asked why I had to wear the gun at the table. And when the local news came on again, and we gathered around the TV to watch the Vigilante story, her only words were “Well, I think he was cute.”

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At work the next day the talk I overheard about the shooting was overwhelmingly favorable. Rick summed it up best when he called it “a much-needed punk advisory.”

Tuesday was an uneventful day. Then, on Wednesday, before leaving work, I made my daily call home. I think that Audrey comes up with something for me to get because she sees it as a love offering. This day it was a half gallon of milk.

I hurried into Albertson’s, got the milk and headed for the register at the end, the express line for those with ten items or less. A cash only line.

There was a man ahead of me, and in front of him an old woman was taking groceries out of her cart and placing them on a counter so full that she had to wait for it to inch forward before there was space for the next item. A young girl, probably a high school student, was scanning the items and bagging them. Ten items? There had to be thirty.

The man turned to face me. He was about my age, but rough-looking, with a day’s growth of stubble on his cheeks. He held up a pint of ice cream and gestured with his head toward the old woman. His words were muttered bitterly, out of the side of his mouth.

“Express, huh? This’ll be soup before I get out of here.”

I nodded, smiled vaguely, and he turned back around.

The old woman was done removing groceries from her cart. Now she had positioned herself with her eyes a few inches from the register display; her nose and chin jutted forward aggressively. She clutched a worn purse with both hands, like a bird’s claws gripping a branch.

“Wait! Those prunes.” Her voice was rusty-sounding, querulously strident. “What did you charge me for those prunes?”

The girl, looking increasingly uncomfortable — I thought I detected the warmth of a blush on her very white skin — scrolled the register receipt forward.

“\$2.69.”

“That’s not right. Those prunes are \$1.89.”

“I think that’s the smaller size.”

“Not so! I always get this size. They’re \$1.89.”

The girl picked up the store phone. Now her face had a definite glow. “Need a price check on one.” She was pretty, fresh, and I couldn’t help but think of Sherry in her place.

The man turned to me again, muttering “Jesus H. Christ on a tricycle.”

We waited. A boy came, looked at the bag of prunes the girl held up, hurried away.

“Sorry,” the girl said to us two men, smiling apologetically. The old woman turned to us. “I *know* they’re \$1.89.” Looking into those small, black eyes, full of stubborn outrage, I thought of a vulture fighting over carrion.

The boy was back. “\$2.69.”

“Not so! You never even looked at what size it was. Well then, I don’t want them. Not at the wrong price.”

The girl picked up the phone again.

“Need a void on one.”

The man again looked my way. This time he didn’t speak, just raised his eyebrows. And me? It’s important for you to know that I wasn’t angry, nor impatient. I was

observing it all dispassionately. It was as if I were just waiting. The seconds passed like individual drops of water falling into a glass, inexorably filling it. I waited.

The manager, a middle-aged man in a white shirt and tie, arrived and voided the item.

The girl finished the scanning and began to call out the total.

“Now you just hold on, missy,” said the querulous voice. “I got coupons.”

The old woman began rummaging in her purse.

I watched. I observed it all: The man in front of me shifting from foot to foot, the girl with her apologetic smile, the old woman clawing at the insides of her purse, oblivious to all but her avaricious self. Grasping for her precious thirty-five cent coupons.

The seconds ticked away like drops of water falling, the glass growing fuller. I felt it growing. . . .

The old woman handed over the coupons, the girl scanned them.

“You’re not doubling them?”

“We only double them on Thursdays.”

The old woman turned to us. “See? See how they do you?”

“Your total is \$48.24.”

The old woman opened her purse again. She took out a checkbook. She began thumbing through it.

“I need a pen,” she said.

And at those words it overflowed, a swelling conviction overflowed inside me. Here before me was a sweeping refusal to obey the rules by which a society can function. I put my milk on the candy rack, got the nylon mask from my pocket, slipped it over my head. I took the revolver out of its holster. I tapped the man on the shoulder.

“Please move aside, sir.”

He turned, then fell to his knees. The girl screamed as I fired.

The bullet’s impact propelled the old woman and her cart into the front aisle.

Pandemonium. The man, on all fours, scuttled past my legs, staggered up and disappeared. He had dropped his ice cream; I picked it up and placed it on the counter. I put my gun next to it. The counter moved forward jerkily. The girl cringed back against her partition, clutching both hands in front of her mouth.

I took out my badge, held it up for all to see.

“Vigilante,” I called out.

The manager had run to the front of the store. He looked at me, then raised both arms high. “Vigilante!” he shouted. “It’s OK, people. It’s just the Vigilante again.”

Heads began to reemerge. Some people stepped forward to gaze at the body, then to stare at me. I sensed that there was an air of expectancy, and I recalled the remark I had made Monday, when standing by the red truck. I gestured at the body.

“Too slow for express,” I said.

At these words there was a release of tension. People drifted back to their lines. I began to hear the beeper go off as items were again scanned.

The manager called out. “Paul, Antonio, Kevin.” Three boys in white dress shirts and narrow ties came to stand before the manager. They looked uneasily from him to the body.

“Kevin, get one of those heavy garbage bags, the jumbo size.” The boy hurried off. “You, Antonio, get the mop and pail. Paul, move this cart out of the way.”

Kevin arrived with a black garbage bag and Paul joined him.

“Open it,” said the manager. “No, not that way. You’re not going to put her *in* it, for crying out loud. Put her *on* it. Here, let me show you.” The manager spread the bag next to the body. “Now roll her onto it. Come on, she’s not going to bite you. There you go. Now, take it by the corners. That’s it. Take her into the back. No, no! Don’t try to pick it up. Drag it, let it slide on the floor. There you go.” The boys dragged their load off. Antonio arrived with the mop and pail and began to swab the floor.

All the time this was going on the checkout girl had not changed her position. She still stared at me with her fists by her mouth.

It was her I was concerned about. As the store returned to normal I spoke to her in a gentle tone. There were only the two of us at the express counter.

“What I don’t want is for you to blame yourself in any way. I know how hard it would be for a young person to turn an old lady away. What happened was entirely her fault. Not yours, not in any way. Understand?”

She nodded. Her fists relaxed a bit.

“Here, let me see your name tag.” Her arms came down slowly, revealing the swell of her breasts. “Denise. A pretty name. Are you a high school student?”

She nodded. “A senior.”

“Earning money for college?”

“Yes.”

“I admire your pluck, ambition. It’s an invaluable experience, work is. A character builder, too. Do you have a major in mind, Denise?”

“I’m thinking about physical therapy.”

“A caring profession. I can tell that you’re a caring person. You know, Denise, I have a daughter a few years younger than you. Sherry, but I call her my Pumpkin. Well, *used* to call her that. Right now she’s kind of betwixt and between. Rebelling, I guess you could say, against being my little girl. Know what I mean?”

“I went through that, with my parents.”

“And you’re over it now?”

“Oh, sure. We get along fine now.”

“So it’ll pass, with Sherry?” I spoke, behind the mask, with a comically exaggerated eagerness. “You promise me that it’ll pass?”

Denise smiled.

“Ahh, there it is — I got a smile from you.” I suppressed a desire to reach out and touch her cheek.

“You going to be OK?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

I paid for the milk. When Denise gave me the change our hands touched for a moment.

I strode out of the store.

At home that night we watched the news together. I was pleased when Denise described me as “a real nice man.” I went on quite a bit about her — how sweet, pretty, hard-working, caring she was. For Sherry’s benefit. Two can play her game. Sherry acted bored by it all, but when she went upstairs I was pleased to hear the door to her room slam shut.

The news reporter related my laconic, Dirty Harryish comment: “Too slow for express.”

Little did I know that it would be my last quote. Or, for that matter, the last time I fired the gun with a detached conviction. All that followed would be confusion.

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Thursday afternoon I drove to the hospital, where I had some business to conduct. Afterwards I went to a little coffee shop, a breakfast and lunch place, to organize my papers. It was empty except for a Hispanic woman behind the counter, cleaning up for the day. I ordered coffee and sat at a table by the window, my back to the entrance.

I wasn't there five minutes when I heard a female voice. I looked up. A tall, blond girl, probably in her early twenties, passed my table. She was talking into a little cell phone held daintily to her ear. She wore a blue beret slanted at a rakish angle. She was quite pretty, in a Nordic way, with a peaches and cream complexion. She wore a long, green dress of a knitted material that hugged each curve of her slender body, widening nicely at the hips. Her shoes had very thick soles. Platform shoes, I believe they call them.

She waited at the counter for her coffee, then sat at a table with her back to me. The woman behind the counter disappeared through a door into the rear of the shop.

The girl talked into the phone. I listened. How could I not? It seems that people speak more loudly into a cell phone than they would to a person across a table from them. So I listened. I couldn't help it, and it seemed that I entered a hellish world. It was interrupted, the story she told, by peals of her laughter.

She told about — well, I would call it an orgy that she described. It was her and her boyfriend — someone named Greg — and a college friend who was visiting and who walked in on them. Who just watched at first, then was invited to “join in the fun.” Greg had “serviced” them both royally. She actually used those words, shamelessly. The story was interrupted by her pretty peals of laughter. I grew sick in my soul.

I'm not a worldly man. I'm not a man in step with these sorry times. Also, I'm a man who happens to respect women, to cherish them. A desperate confusion descended on me, and I began to hastily gather my papers — I had to get out of there — shoving them in my briefcase. I rose, turned — and walking toward me was a black man. Young, tall, wearing a silk shirt, maroon, open at the chest, a gold chain. He put his index finger to his lips, an imperious gesture commanding my silence. It seemed that he was an apparition come to take part in this nightmare. To let him pass I had to sink back in my chair.

He came up to the still-talking girl — she was facing away from him — and suddenly he was on her, his hands grasping at the front of her body. She screamed.

I rose, a buzzing in my head, they struggled — more screams — I took the gun out — or was it laughter now, were those shrieks of delight? — and I fired. A red stain bloomed on the left side of the silk shirt; the man toppled sideways.

The girl's screams were guttural sounds now. The Hispanic woman appeared in the door, then immediately backed out of sight. The girl was kneeling on the floor, cradling the man's head, and I made out the name she was repeating — “Greg, Greg” — and she looked up at me and screamed, obscenity after obscenity, and it had to be stopped, all of it had to end. The gun rose and stopped it all.

I put it in its holster, I took up my briefcase, I left the shop. The sunny street was deserted.

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The bullets we Vigilantes are given are treated with a powder that is left at the entry wound and can be detected by a spectroscope.

On TV it was reported that the Vigilante had struck again. This time two victims.

The reporter, a black girl, emphasized that it was a black man and a white woman who



had been shot, and that they had been romantically involved. There was speculation, she added, that the shooting had been “racially motivated.”

Rioting had begun in some large cities. Al Sharpton was on his way to Texas.

And so now I must state one thing quite emphatically: I am not a racist.

Case in point. For the past eight years I’ve been a member of the homeowner’s association at Goldenwood Estates. Ours is an exclusive gated community with an eighteen hole golf course. Five years ago a renegade real estate agent showed a house to a black couple; they made an offer quite close to the asking price. At an emergency meeting of the homeowner’s association two of the four members wanted to block the sale, and the third was reluctantly amenable to taking that route.

That left me. I spoke, starting with a question.

What is it we stand for? Here we have a forty-six-year-old dentist with a thriving practice in the African-American community. Two children in good colleges. Drives a new Town Car. Given these facts, on what ethical grounds can we object to them? That they’d deal crack out of their house? Gentlemen, what matters? Isn’t it a person’s value system, isn’t that what matters? And — if it is — it seems clear that Calvin and Sheila Casden stand for the same values we do. Which should be all that concerns us.

I closed by suggesting that we invite them to our country club, maybe play a round of golf with Calvin while the women lounge around the pool. See if we all felt comfortable with one another. And that’s what we did. Calvin turned out to be a great guy, a long but wayward driver off the tee. We had to be patient with him, but he was quite apologetic as he hacked his way through the rough, the trees, the sand traps. “Tiger Woods I’m not,” he’d say, shaking his head woefully. Meanwhile, Sheila impressed the women; she was genteel and gracious and intended to furnish her home in French provincial.

Now, due entirely to my intervention, we have living in our subdivision a black family that we’re quite proud of. In fact, when I have someone visiting I’ll make a point of driving them past the Casden house, where most weekends Calvin is working on his yard, and he’ll wave and call out my name in his big, booming voice.

So it was with consternation that I heard Al Sharpton condemn the “brutal racist executioner.” I also felt helpless, unable to explain. Ronnie was the only one unaffected — all he cared about was that I was now being called the “deadly” Vigilante. “Two shots!” he’d exclaim, and fire his toy pistol twice, his arm bucking with the recoils. Sherry and Audrey were giving me curious sideways glances. I told Audrey that I’d explain what really happened later that night.

Because, after dinner, I had to attend a meeting of the homeowner’s association.

What *had* happened? As I walked along the darkening streets I tried to sort out the events, my actions, but I could still feel the buzzing confusion that had set in when I heard the girl talking into her cell phone. After that I had acted without thought. All I felt was that I was defending myself, trying to disentangle myself from a grasping nightmare. It was nothing that could be summarized in a catchy little phrase, like the other two shootings. This time, without words, I had fled the scene. Now I was still without words, or was fumbling about for them.

The homeowner’s association’s meets once a month at the country club building, in a room designed to accommodate about fifty people. There’s no need for us to use this room — hardly anyone attends our meetings — but we have to honor the premise that it’s a public forum, open to all. Truth is, things run pretty smoothly in Goldenwood Estates.

Today we had our usual one-person audience; he was seated in the third row, a shadowy

figure (we only light the stage area). Colonel Bob Gleason, who had trained our militia in the winter of '04. A man I respect above all others. Now in his seventies, he was slim and fit, always impeccably neat; he still wore his white hair in a crisp buzz cut. Before going to the stage I went down the aisle to shake his hand. "Ken, my boy." He always referred to us, the six who lived together those weekends at Proctor National Forest, as "my boys."

He had moved to Goldenwood when his wife was first diagnosed with cancer, so that she could be near one of their daughters. Hers had been a long, brutal illness. Since her death eight months ago he stayed in his house most of the time, turning down all invitations for social engagements. He seemed out of place in our placid community of families, this man who had lived such a dangerous and exciting life. To me Bob Gleason was a true American hero, starting with his four tours of duty as a Force Recon Marine in Vietnam. Maybe his last hurrah, after retirement, had been those weekends at Proctor. Anyway, we on the homeowner's committee always made a point of including him in our discussion — asking him a question or for an opinion. And we were not being condescending. We respected his words.

I joined the three others at the table on the stage and we began without preliminaries. Homeowners who had a problem or request would call one of us up. Today we had only a few matters to consider: Yes, we'd let a camper stay parked in a driveway for another two weeks; no, we couldn't allow an exception on the height of a fence. Then Ben brought up the final issue, the recurrent complaint we'd all been getting for the past months.

"Dog shit."

We groaned, we grimaced, we rocked back in our chairs.

In this subdivision people take pride in their yards — there's a spirited competition for the Garden of the Month award — so folks are quite annoyed to wake up and find that a large pile has been deposited in the center of their lawn.

"But no one has ever spotted a dog wandering around loose?"

"A large dog."

"That narrows down the suspects," said Doug. "To about a hundred families. Including you, Steve, with that Collie of yours."

"Hell, I can personally account for every crap my dog takes. I have to shovel it up. I think it's someone who's letting their dog out in the middle of the night, so they won't have to clean up after him." Steve paused, looked out into the audience and grinned. "And you're a suspect too, Bob, with that bruiser you got."

"Missy?" Bob murmured, and chuckled. "Why, Missy wouldn't do a nasty thing like that."

The name was a joke. Missy was a huge, ugly Rottweiler, though she was docile and friendly.

"I've been thinking about this," I said. "About a dog running loose. And it doesn't make sense. Because why wouldn't it go somewhere inconspicuous, or in the woods? Why would it — I mean, there it is in the middle of the lawn, like a centerpiece on a table."

"What are you saying? That it's led there?"

"Yeah. On a leash."

"Why the hell would anyone . . ." Ben shook his head.

"I can't buy that either," said Doug. "That someone living here would risk getting caught. Colonel Bob, what do you think?"

"Well, what Ken said does make sense to me. As for motivation, I dunno. Maybe the risk

itself, the excitement of doing something forbidden. Or, hell, maybe it's obvious what this person is up to. Maybe he's saying 'Here's what I *really* think of you, Goldenwood.' It could be an expression of contempt, hatred. And, if that *is* the case, I think this guy is a candidate for the Vigilante."

We laughed, me a bit uneasily.

The topic of discussion shifted to today's shooting. Everyone agreed that Al Sharpton should stay out of our business. I decided to try to learn more about how these men felt.

"People are talking race," I said. "But no one knows for sure. Do they? Since there were no witnesses to what happened, how can we judge?"

"Right," said Doug. "The other two shootings were justified, so maybe this one was too. Maybe it wasn't racial at all."

"Or maybe it was." The voice was Bob's; we looked at the figure in the third row; only the white hair was distinct in the dimness.

"Anyway, since that's what people are assuming, let's consider that it *was* racial. You know, there's a long tradition of that sort of thing in this country. And it's not off in the distant past. So what you're saying, Doug, is that if it's racial it's unjustified. Really?"

"Well . . ." Doug shifted in his seat. "Yeah, Bob, it would be wrong then."

"It would? Times change, they say. I happen to believe that human nature stays the same. Some things just go deeper down inside. In hiding. Now I'm a good bit older than any of you, and when I was growing up in Michigan — Michigan, mind you, not Mississippi — and there was all this integration hullabaloo going on, there was one challenge that could end any argument. 'How'd you like your sister to marry one?' That'd shut 'em up. Now that we're older, gentlemen, let's consider our daughters. Our precious, sweet daughters. I have three, all safely married to their own kind, and when my grandchildren were born and I held them and looked into their eyes, I was glad that the blood in their veins was Celtic and Germanic blood. That horrid, warlike blood of my ancestors. Blood, gentlemen. I hold to the old verities — it's all about sex and blood. Should the races be mixing their blood? Or shouldn't they? What's your choice, for your daughters? In my opinion, if the Vigilante shot those two because it was a black man and a white woman, I say good for him. The true duty of the Vigilante is to express his feelings. Whatever they may be. In a sense his role is a cautionary one, he should issue warnings, including those from deep inside. Especially those, the hidden ones. We've entrusted him to do so." Bob laughed. "Take that old gal he got rid of. Being a geezer myself, I should disapprove. But it was way past time for her to move aside. Actually, I'd like to go that way. It'd be a fitting end for me, to die by quick violence. And a hell of a lot easier than what I saw Betsy go through. Anyway, gentlemen, in closing I'd say that this Vigilante is doing fine. Just fine." He stood up. "Oh, one other thing. He's one hell of a marksman. Head or heart, every time. And he's still got two bullets left. Who knows what awaits us?"

Walking home in the darkness, I felt liberated. I faced up to the sequence of events in the coffee shop: It *was* the girl's wanton laughter that I had heard before I fired the first bullet. In bed that night I told Audrey that I had shot those two because I never, never wanted Sherry to be what that girl was, to do what she was doing. Audrey put her hand on my chest.

Still, I couldn't sleep. At 3:40 I decided that I might as well go to my office, catch up on paperwork. I eased out of bed, gathered my clothes and holster, and went into the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later I stood by the front of my garage. The subdivision looked eerie in the morning darkness. Absolutely still. We have no streetlights, just the glow from some decorative

gas lanterns. The moon was a thin crescent. Not a light in any window. A bird let out a single note.

I thought I saw movement far to my left. I stood motionless, gazing that way, waiting. It was two houses down. Nothing there anymore. Then someone emerged from behind a SUV, wearing dark clothes that blended in with the darkness; the figure soon disappeared behind a tall hedge.

A nighttime stroller? Or could this person be leading a dog? A large dog . . .

Duty, again.

I went to my back yard, made my way behind one house and then moved stealthily along the side of a garage. I came to the corner and peered around it. And there, in the center of the yard, was the person, his or her back to me, partially blocking my view of a dog at the end of a leash.

I pulled back out of sight. So — it was true. Someone was intentionally . . . Who? Bob had said it was someone who actually had contempt for this subdivision. Hate. Then I thought of him, the person who could nurse a secret hate for us all.

Calvin Casden.

I took the mask out, slipped it over my head, then unholstered the revolver. What was called for was a scare, a warning. I edged again to the corner of the garage.

The figure, about thirty feet away, wearing a long dark robe and a dark baseball cap, was now positioned so that I could see the dog at the end of the jiggling leash.

“Come on, girl.” It was a man’s voice, a familiar voice, softly urging. “Come on, girl.”

The dog — a Rottweiler — began to circle, then squatted.

I let the revolver fall to my side. After a few moments I stepped forward, spoke to the back of the figure.

“Good morning, Colonel.”

He turned, gazed at my masked face without a trace of alarm.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Just talking about you last night, Vigilante.” As casual as could be.

The dog was done. She frisked, moved toward me, grinning horribly, tail wagging, til she reached the end of the leash.

“Who’s behind the mask?” asked the colonel.

I pulled it off with one hand.

“Well, well. I’ll be twice damned. If it isn’t Ken Stark. One of my boys.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I said why last night. A bit of excitement for an old man. And I don’t much like this place, this prissy little world of Goldenwood Estates. I guess I don’t much like this world.”

“So you’d make it ugly?”

“It is, already. Uglier than you could ever imagine. But come to my house, I have some coffee brewing, we can talk philosophy.” The dog was pulling away. Bob was tugged sideways. He smiled at me, shook his head. “Ken . . . You done good. You been a hell of a Vigilante. Yes, I’m proud of you, my boy.”

He moved where the dog was pulling, then I saw the dog moving off by itself and I thought that this was odd and then Bob was turning toward me and his arm was coming up, something was in his hand, and I heard a loud bang and something slammed into my left shoulder and as it did I heard the sound again and my right arm jerked back with the recoil of my own revolver. Bob fell to his knees. I staggered, it felt as if a hot iron, the searing point of it, had been

swung hard, had torn into my shoulder, and I watched the figure before me, on his knees, begin to rise up, the head, white now without the cap, rising like a specter, and I saw the arm start to rise again. I aimed my gun carefully and fired.

The dog was fleeing, dragging her leash. I turned, moved woodenly along the garage, along the back of the house. My arm was aflame, and my mind flashed to those colored drawings of the arterial system of the human body, but with one part horribly ruptured, twisted, tangled. I moved into my yard, wondering if lights were clicking on in houses, curtains being pulled aside, robes being shrugged into. I entered my garage, got to the door leading into the kitchen, turned the knob. It was locked. I pounded once, then sat on the cement step, my back to the door. “Audrey,” I called, but it was a weary croak. I finally looked down at my arm. The sleeve of my jacket was wet with blood. I heard footsteps pounding in a run, the door opened behind me, and I sank back against her legs.

Audrey, a nursing major in college, was calm. She eased me to the tile floor, then got scissors and cut away the clothing. One naked arm was revealed, white with long streaks of red.

“It’s not very deep, Ken. I think the bullet went through.”

I heard a voice from just outside the kitchen. It wavered, cautious, full of fright.

“Mom? Dad?”

I sensed a hesitation. Then the words came in a panicky wail.

“Dad! What happened? Daddy!”

I heard her bare feet on the kitchen tile, then saw them. Sherry dropped to her knees by my side. “Daddy! What’s wrong?” I looked at her tear-streaked face. She wore her powder-blue pajamas with the snowmen tilted all over it. I smiled.

“It’s OK, Pumpkin. Everything will be fine. I’m OK.”

\*

I was. Audrey called the mayor, the mayor called Dr. Jenkins, and he made a hasty pre-dawn house call. The bullet hadn’t done any serious damage. He treated and bandaged the wound, gave me some pain pills, and ordered me to remain in bed for a few days. I called the office and told them I wouldn’t be in until Monday.

Sherry stayed home from school. She refused to leave me. For lunch she set up a tray with a bowl of chicken noodle soup, a glass of milk and two oreo cookies. She sat on the bed and watched me eat. She and Audrey tiptoed around the house. The pills made me groggy and I dozed a lot. I thought a lot too, in this half-awake state. At noon I turned on the TV. The Vigilante had struck again, this time in the exclusive Goldenwood Estates subdivision. It had apparently been a regular wild west shootout. The fact that the victim was who he was — a white ex-military man of definitely conservative persuasion — blunted the racial issue. Al Sharpton made one speech at a Houston Baptist church and returned to New York. Again, as with the shooting yesterday, no one had witnessed the events leading up to it. Regarding a possible motive, a member of the homeowner’s association at Goldenwood, who asked to remain anonymous, mentioned a problem the subdivision had been having with a dog defecating on the lawns. There was evidence supporting that as . . .

I lowered the volume with my remote; the reporter droned on.

I recalled what Bob had said at the meeting — that it was the Vigilante’s duty to issue warnings. People would have to decide what those warnings were. If the last four bullets would help slow down the decline of morality in our country, or help keep our neighborhoods clean, they had served a worthwhile purpose.

But as for the morning's shooting, I had come to understand what lay below the surface. What had taken place was a humanitarian act. I had given Bob the kind of death he wanted. But he had given me something too: Life. Because I knew one thing with certainty. When Bob fired his revolver he had hit me exactly where he intended. He could have killed me. He had chosen not to. He had left me with the duty and the privilege of carrying on.

From a great distance I heard the reporter's words: The six bullets were gone. This Vigilante's term was over.

I clicked off the TV. The drapes were drawn and the room was almost dark. My eyes closed. I remembered Bob's last words: "I'm proud of you, my boy." I slipped off into a deep and peaceful sleep.

\*

That evening I proposed that Sherry and I go to Baskin-Robbins, bring back some ice cream. I had been cooped up all day.

"Come on, Pumpkin, you can drive."

Moving through the dark streets, she gave a running commentary on her safe driving habits.

"Look, Dad. Hands at ten and two. OK, now I come to a full stop. Four seconds — a thousand one, a thousand two — "

She grinned slyly at me, but I knew that behind the smile was a promise: She would be careful in life, she would do the right thing.

And I murmured, again and again, "Good girl, good girl," and we drove to the mall.