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Break In

HOOP PLANNED TO GET IN and out as quickly as possible. Six to eight minutes is all it should take to storm a house. Treat it like a timed shopping spree, like a gameshow, like a shot clock speeding to :00 at the top of the screen. But for some reason, the back bedroom with its otherworldly girliness threw him, and when he heard the garage door rumbling up, he ran down the stairs, then down one more level (he panicked) into the basement and hid under the stairs. He didn't even see the side entrance.

This house—this whole subdivision—was only five stops from his. He first noticed it from the back corner seat of the 41 bus and tracked its progress over the spring like a seed in a paper cup. First the land was pushed around into mounds, then cement planted into the patterns of an old civilization, then wooden walls went up, then plastic walls, then dark shingles, then orange brick. By the end of April some of the houses were almost ready to be occupied. Hoop—not for Hooper, for his skills balling—and his friend, Duane, got off early to explore what guys were calling, with bravado, *The Houses*.

LATE EVENING, A MONTH into first semester, a guy and his girl walk from school to Phase 2 of the Houses. He leads her to a Siamese house, joined at the cheek. He leads her to the left twin and they enter through the mouth. Inside is a mess of exposed plumbing, wood, and wires. Orange codes are spraypainted on the walls.

The guy's been in houses like this before, in this situation or nearly. He suggests they use the basement to avoid curious homeowners or kids looking for hide-and-seek territory; those types usually stay on the main floor, or they might go upstairs and check out the bedrooms. "No one ever goes down to the basement," he says. What's there to see? Insulation,

Everyone knew that guys took girls to the Houses to get some, except for the ninth-grade poppers, who used it as a handholding kissing ground. But you'd have to go in the afternoon for that kind of softcore action.

The day Hoop and Duane went, the front door of lot 23L was unlocked. There were beige ceramic tiles in the small front foyer, and a step up to a narrow hallway that was not yet carpeted, then, in walking sequence, powder room, basement door, open concept kitchen (with breakfast bar), dining, and family room, and a small raised deck beyond the sliding glass doors.

"Look at this," Duane said. He was still at the entrance, one hand on the door, the other on the frame. "All you gotta do is knock and the whole thing'll fly apart."

"What are you talking about?" Hoop walked back to the foyer.

Duane closed the door and turned the lock. "See how this deadbolt fits in here? The casing—the wood—all around the frame is really thin. The only thing holding it there is these nails, what? half inch."

"Cause of the glass," Hoop said. There were panels on either side of the door.

"Yeah. They can't nail the casing in any more." He pulled hard on the locked door and the frame seemed to give. "They best get an alarm up in here."



At the time, *Not at night*. In the afternoon everyone's at work. Hoop had no plans to invade lot 23L. *All black's for the movies. Jeans, a hoody—nobody'll look at you twice*. But that little piece of information from

concrete floors, a drain, bare bulbs, support beams, maybe a rough-in for a bathroom.

He says, "We could get our [unclear] on" and puckers his lips slightly, cool, touches the brim of his hat.

She knows this is where girls come to let themselves be touched. The fur around her hood dusts her forehead. She's been to the Houses before, not since Phase I though, and then it wasn't with this guy.

He makes a show of opening the basement door for her. She steps down carefully, holding her hair to the sides of her face. Behind her, the guy's arms swish against his bubble vest. This morning he only had style in mind, but during the last two afternoon periods, when he proposed the

Duane especially with all the Blacks and Indians in the area. You'll just seem like someone's kid existed Who knows their neighbour anymore? for him like a theory to be proven. *Bring a package, ring the doorbell, enter through the door inside the garage.* If it were possible simply to enter a house by kicking down the door, *Just. Only. Easy.* why weren't more houses robbed? Or, flip side, *think of the cred, man* why weren't more people robbing?

Bus ride after bus ride *Only bag stuffs small enough to fit in a knapsack*, the thought swelled in his head *and not too much, laptop, mp3 player, camera* until he finally, *If it don't fit, you must acquit* finally he tried to get in and out as quickly as possible. Six to eight minutes is enough to take. Minute 7 he saw photos over the fireplace. To a blue eye, the girls in separate frames might look like the same girl or twins: each wore two thick plaits like upside down horns on the side of her head, a toothless thickclipped smile, the same pink sweater though the turtlenecks inside were different. But he could tell that they were not the same girl, not twins either. Just poor, at the time, and wearing hand-me-downs.

Minute 6 he saw a glasses case and telephone bill on the arm of the converted patio furniture in the family room. The surname on the envelope was Pearson, like the airport.

Minute 5, upstairs in the master bedroom, he caught himself in the mirror of the ensuite, knapsack on one shoulder. On the counter, marble, must have been an upgrade, a bottle of baby oil, a tube of cut-open foundation, and a comb with hair curling in it stare back at him like three guard dogs. He hears for the first time the low growl of the refrigerator downstairs.

Minute 4, back bedroom, the older girl's, wallpapered with posters, carpeted with skirts and dresses left where she stepped out of them. Minute

idea of hanging out after school, the vest turned into something else—padding.

Light slants downward through the small windows on one side of the basement. Flecks of dust turn somersaults in the smoky light. The girl started talking dirty into his ear during third or fourth period, and now she wishes she hadn't. In this hollow, the ribs showing like the inside of a cathedral or a half-eaten turkey, she feels both watched and abandoned.

"Let's go upstairs," she says, turning around with her arms folded.

"Hold up, hold up," he says. He takes both her hands in his, unfolds her arms. "Didn't you say you wanted."

"It's dirty."

3 he didn't know what to take. His bag was still empty. Minute 3 he heard the 41 pass. Minute 3 he looked in her closet. Minute 2 the garage door opened. Minute 2 he inadvertently ran to the basement. Minute 2 the car doors closed. Minute 2 he ducked his head under the comforter covering boxes under the stairs. Overtime.

For a gun he had a boxcutter.



The suspect description was inaccurate. A neighbour who thought she saw someone in the area around the time of the break-in swore to male black six feet between twenty and twenty-five, at least two hundred pounds dark baggy clothes baseball cap with a hood pulled over it. In fact, the kid she didn't see looked eighteen but was fifteen, black yes, tall yes, not wearing what she saw, but an oversized basketball jersey. He was long necked, his arms had the definition of a woman who curled light weights.

And he was strong, though he didn't look it. Shaking his hand or escaping his headlock, you'd wonder where he stored all that strength. His bones must be made of metal.



"Some wayward boy do this," the woman said. Her deep voice engorged Hoop's heart with rhythm. Wayward was his mother's word.

"Call the police."

"He's gone." The patio door slid open.

"Don't touch anything. Call the police. What if he comes back? What if he's still here?"

"Dirty, huh." He speaks into her lips. "You been talking dirty all day."

Wasn't anything he said that made her stay—he could have been on mute—but strobe flashes of him on the court with his wifebeater pulled up behind his neck, and his slow kiss near her locker, thumb on her chin, and girls everywhere razing her with their eyes. This guy was—*real* was the only word, so said his shining bottom lip, his peach breath, and hot hands. She would approach the next few minutes as a job to be done, a vegetable to be eaten. And if she felt like it she might talk to her girls—her real girls—to-night, or she might not.

"Tasha. Tasha! Stay here."

Pattering.

"Mom said don't go upstairs."

"I wasn't going anywhere."

"Hello? Yes somebody break in my house. (From the mother's responses, Hoop could tell what the dispatcher was asking.) I'm at 12 Deerpass Lane, it don't have a number outside, lot 23L. [Where do you live?] In the kitchen. [Where are you now?] No, my two girls with me. [Are you alone? Or possibly, Is anyone hurt?] I don't know. I don't see anybody. The door was open when I come home. [Is the suspect there?] Please send somebody quick, the police. I live at twel [They've already been dispatched, ma'am.]. The front door [Which door did you find open?] No, like the inside door from the garage. It was broken like, smashed [The front door?] The police coming? [The officers will be there any minute.] Please hurry. I don't know. [Is anything missing?] I think so. We're in the kitchen. [Are you all safe?] Okay. Okay. Mm. Okay. [Here's what I want you to do ...]"

There's no reason to be afraid of me, Hoop thought. He was a spider at the heel of a woman. It might be better to get out now, just run, up the stairs out the front, wave the boxcutter. He could cover his face. When the police came, there'd be no waving the boxcutter. Lord Jesus. Straight to Juvy. And his mother. Lord God.

"Police!" Boots clomped overhead.

"In the kitchen," said the mother, Ms. (there was no man on the mantle) Pearson. A man's voice spoke mechanically into his shoulder-mounted walkie-talkie, which beeped back before emitting a voice hoarse with static. Another police officer, shorter, unable to grow facial hair, wearing a too-big uniform, appeared behind the first like an echo. The first one told

He's got a breathy reenactment set for tomorrow: *She was like Oh no no and I was like Yeas, No oh, Yeas, Nob, Yeeas, Oh yeaas yes!*

He only kneads her body for a few minutes. Then it starts to relax. His cue comes from her knees, which bounce slowly as if in a pool before her legs give way. He spits out his gum and kisses her neck, the side of her face. One of her hands slides on the bubble vest beneath her; the other pushes against his shoulder. Something feels sharp, the vest's zipper, maybe a loose nail. She thinks, irrationally and foolishly, but she thinks it all the same: *I don't want to die like this.*

He backs away suddenly and sits on his heels, fumbling with his zipper now instead of with her. Where did his hat go? Wasn't he wearing a

the woman and her girls to wait where they were. The officers had already searched the first floor (he said this to the walkie-talkie, not to the family) to get to the kitchen at the back of the house. The first officer started up the stairs toward the bedrooms and told Echo to check the basement. Echo never seemed to be looking at anything in particular; his gaze darted as if he were tracking a housefly.

Ms. Pearson didn't register on his motion detector. She felt like a witness caught in a hologram of a house resembling her own but belonging to these blue men who walked around touching boxes on their hips or shoulders. The house became the model, open for the public to inspect, to walk on the carpet in dirty shoes. She couldn't help but notice.



Every sense shut off except his hearing. First he heard footsteps descending, each foot a different pitch. Hearing them made him want to cry. He imagined the footsteps belonging to a football player in a uniform of a thousand pockets, something deadly in each, gun drawn, little red laser searching for his forehead.

Then he heard the cop pull a chain to turn on a bulb. He was so well covered that he did not notice the light. Or were his eyes closed?

Next rubber across the floor. That was the cold cellar opening. Another chain being pulled. On then off. The door closed.

The feet passed him. The washer opened, then the dryer. On the way back to the stairs, the footsteps stopped. The officer knocked some boxes under the stairs with his baton, then again with his gun (all supposi-

hat? He is saying something, but he is on mute again, reaching for his wallet. The sight of it, thick and brown, tips her mind. She looks at the wad of gum on the cement floor.

"Won't hurt."

A moment after he tears the package and unrolls the rubber the upstairs door opens. Footsteps patter. A woman's voice, *too small, this foyer, but look they have a step up to the hallway*. The girl pulls her clothes close to her, straightens up. The guy stops her arm. No sound. *Oh and Kevin look at this kitchen, see I told you the island was necessary, and look looklooklooklook they upgraded the backslash?* The voices continue upstairs into the bedrooms. In the basement, the two of them look upward, as if listening with their eyes.

tion). Echo was waiting for the thief to screw things up, to sneeze or cough or shuffle. Hoop thought his trembling was seismic. Wasn't he panting? Wasn't his heart drumming—he recalled a short story from eighth grade, “The Tell-Tale Heart” it was called, but who was the author? Lisa Simpson came to mind. Now he was supposed to burst through the boxes screaming something, throwing his backpack at the feet of the officer, compressing the sides of his head between his hands.



The first officer got the woman's story. She was questioned only for information, as if her fear and sense of violation were unnecessary. The girls didn't say anything. They just stood to one side of their mother in descending height. The older one watched the officer drill her mother first with his mouth, then with his eyes, then with something further back in his skull like a low-frequency wave.

After each question, she could fill in what he was thinking.

Do you own this home? [She's probably renting, we should speak to the owners.]

You were all off the premises, out shopping you said? when the break-in occurred? [Dumb down your language, boy.]

No one saw the suspect? [Black-on-black crime.] The officer noticed that chubbiness ran in the family. *Medium build*, he wrote, just to write something. He saw the curtains hanging by thumbtacks, the cushions on patio furniture, and wrote *new owners*.

Were these rooms empty before? [What do you have to steal?]

Echo came up.

When the voices finally leave, the girl says with her palms, “I can't do this. It's too risky.”

“They're gone,” he says, but she is already off his vest, brushing shavings from her skirt.

“I said I can't, all right?” She starts up the stairs. “Don't follow me right away.”

No answer.

“I'll meet you by the site office.”

“Whatever.”

Her chin squeezes into her neck and she looks down on him from the basement stairs, his boxers are showing, as always.

“Whatever,” she echoes back.

“Clear,” was all he said, then circled the kitchen looking for a housefly. After a few moments, he announced his intention (to his walkie-talkie) to search the exterior of the premises.

As her mother was still answering questions and Tasha was fascinated by the stripe down the first officer’s pant leg, the older daughter was the only one who caught Echo’s mumble from outside the patio door. She heard him say, “Not [inaudible, much?] furniture. Looks like she was robbed before,” followed by a rush of air out his nostrils, not a laugh quite. And, most significantly, she hears a smile at the other end of the walkie-talkie.



When the police left, the Pearson family only felt marginally safer. The thief wasn’t in the house, but he could come back. The door from the garage would be unsecured all night, so he could come back for larger items, perhaps with a truck and a swarm of thugs.



So they fixed up the front exits the best they could with chairs and old-fashioned booby traps. The patio door entrance was obstructed with a houseplant. Tasha didn’t have to sleep alone if she didn’t want to.

Hoop looked at the time on his cell phone. 6:58. He’d been there for hours, and he had hours more to go before the family went to sleep. Maybe when they were all in the bedrooms, he’d take a chance and sneak out. Except for his knees, which were too sharply bent for too long, he was fairly comfortable under the stairs. Earlier he had removed the comforter



Upstairs in one of the back bedrooms of an unfinished house, Hoop and Duane, girlfriendless, observe Janice crossing the tread marks of hardened mud. Duane does not recognize her, of course, but Hoop knows her instantly. Her name appears in his head, in Times New Roman. Then a fellow emerges from the same house, dusting the front of his vest, looking both ways, putting a thumb to a nostril and sniffing tough-man style, then he picks up a slight limp and exits the site.

Hoop wants to hurt him.

from over his head so that his eyes could get adjusted to the dark. But there was nothing to see.

Upstairs, they were watching TV. Drawers and cupboards closed. The music for an entertainment tabloid came on.

“Ready,” the mother called over the music. “Tasha, come and eat.”

Hoop smelled fried sardines upstairs. He was hungry, and gassy. That was another reason he uncovered his head.

“Did they check the cold room in the basement?” the mother asked. She poured hot Ovaltine into their cups then soaked the pot.

“I don’t know. You want me to go down?” The older girl volunteered herself. “Give me a broom or something.”

“You don’t have to go. Eat.” Ms. Pearson kissed her teeth. “I thought I heard—daycare, maybe. They build these houses too close.”

“Here’s my umbrella,” said Tasha.

“Girl, go and sit down!” Ms. Pearson said to Tasha, pointing hard at the patio table. “That’s your food from this morning.”

The basement light went on. Through the slats in the stairs, Hoop saw her ripple down: one dry heel then another, the back of her knee, the fingers of one hand around a Pooh yellow and red umbrella, the other must have been on the banister. She reached the bottom, and like Echo, walked to the cold room.

“I don’t see anything,” she shouted up as if checking the hold of a grappling hook.

“Hurry up,” a little voice came back, then the upstairs door closed and footsteps ran away from the door of the basement: Tasha going to the kitchen to report.

Hoop was trying to place the cover over his head again, but his hand knocked the back of a stair. The sound was enough to alert the girl. She

Duane wants to check out the house they came from. He puts a fist to his mouth and whoop whoops. Starting to limp himself, he walks from the bedroom and says, “That’s what I’m talkin bout.”

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Doorbell. There’s a security sign on the front glass. That’s new.

“Who is it? Tasha don’t open.”

“I’m not a baby.”

“Tasha I said no.”

whirled around with the umbrella raised over her head, ready to throw or strike.

JaniceIwon'thurtanyofyou, Hoop whispered before she could scream or run, before she knew who she was seeing.

She saw his wet forehead and his two dark eyes, which were vibrating, barely, like a tuning fork between fear and fatigue and anger and madness. His hand was about to pull her old comforter over his head; half uncovered, he looked like an Old Testament prophet.

Hoop saw the next two hours in a second. His mother's agonized image, the lines from her nose to jaw, her overprocessed hair, the carpet of the eleventh-floor hallway, flanked by two officers, Echo's thousand pockets, the door opening inward, his mother's heavy bottom lip, one hand on the door, and he could have read inside of her too, she thinks *don't answer* at the knock, she thinks if I could give him 23L, if the bank would qualify me, she thinks of herself in church, God give me *strength* to raise my child in this country, and in a few months, in the winter, she would think of his deviance, his big expensive feet, while riding the bus between jobs in workpants belted over her paunch, double socked, in white no-name sneakers, and curse the cold cold winters of this country and remember her government job in Jamaica then fall asleep with her head on the window in someone else's grease patch.

Tears came when Hoop blinked. "Please," he said.



Tasha ran back to the door and opened it when she heard Janice's footsteps approaching the top.

Tasha opens anyway; Ms. Pearson is flapping her hands dry as she approaches the door.

"Um," Hoop says. He scratches his nose. He'll have to lie. "I go to Janice's school. She left this behind and I just ..."

"Janice!" The mother shouts.

"You don't have to call her. Here, just give it to ..."

"Come in. She coming. Janice!" Ms. Pearson hurries back to the kitchen, slapping her slippers.

Hoop steps inside. They've installed bolts on the front door and the one leading to the garage. At the end of the hallway he sees real furniture. Leather.

“Did you see the killer?”

“Uh uh.”

“I just wasn’t sure if they checked,” said the mother from the kitchen.
“Come eat.”

“Girl, you look scared.”



Hoop could no longer hear them, only the zooming sounds of segments changing on that entertainment show. The volume was higher. Janice must have been whispering everything up there, then they’d barricade the basement door, call the police, then there’d be a loudspeaker and handcuffs and dogs and a helicopter whirring and a camera and the Bad Boys theme song.

He started making a deal with God. *Lord, if you, if You, could get me out by some miracle*—How had he known Janice’s name? Was that her name? Her name had come so easily to him, though he didn’t recall noticing it, unlike the mother’s bills on the patio furniture. *God if You, if YOU, could find a way out of this situation for me, then I’ll* Her room—that’s where. On the door she had stuck up *Janice’s room Keep out!* like a white girl would, Hoop thought, but he had been so distracted by the poster of some glistening, thick-legged, R&B singer, hair blowing like a horse that he didn’t remember the sign.

Then I’ll what? Anything you want, Lord Jesus. That’s how his mother prayed, every time there was a comma, she would fill up the space with *Lord Jesus*, barely aware that she was saying it.

Hoop made God an offer. He could refuse.

Janice comes down the stairs (it *was* her in Phase II). Tasha walks back to the staircase and says *ooh* with her back to Hoop.

He holds out a baseball hat, then he takes his mp3 player from his pocket. “I found it, just now, back—” he points a thumb over his shoulder.

It’s not mine you better get the hell out of here who do you think you are coming to my mother’s house with your broken guilt trying to be all hero acting like you know me you don’t know me fool you think you got my back I said you best run before I call the police on your skinny wannabe gangsta self I take you on myself nigga It’s what she would say outside, but not in this house.

Even if he did get out, Hoop would need an explanation, one that would satisfy the police as well as his mother. It was somebody else's idea; this guy at school, I heard him talking so I tried it. I wasn't looking for anything. I just wanted to see if I could do it. Play dumb, good. Or I was curious about how the inside of the houses looked now that they were finished. There wasn't any car in the driveway. I thought this one hadn't closed yet. [Didn't you see the shoes and the mat, the furniture?] Yeah, as soon as I saw all that, the people came and I got scared so I hid. Better. [What about all the stuff in your bag?] Dang.

The basement door opened again and Janice stepped down to the landing to collect some plastic bags—that's where they kept them, stuffed in a garbage bag. She took one more step down from the landing—Hoop could grab her ankle to plead again or just slit her tendon with the boxcutter—and called up with her grappling hook voice, "I need some air, we should go out."

"So late?"

"It's not late." The plastic bags hissed. "I at least need some air, but I'm not walking around with some crazy in the neighborhood."

She was at the top of the stairs again. Her ankle was out of reach. Light flossed through the crack in the door.

"All right, just now, when Tasha brush she teeth."



Still Hoop didn't trust her completely. She was evacuating the house so they'd be safe to call the police and dogs, camera, helicopter, etc.

But then footsteps ran down the upper staircase. Tasha protested

Ms. Pearson comes padding back in her slippers. She looks at Janice. She looks at Hoop. Hoop pulls up his pants with one hand and scratches the back of his neck with the other.

wearing a coat when Janice didn't have to, chairs were cleared from the entrance, and the front door closed loudly. Hoop waited a few moments in case someone had forgotten her keys or needed to come back to pee. When the house was still, he came out of hiding—his heart was accelerating again—willed his sore knees up the stairs and out the side entrance.

He walked to the back of the house, cut across the unfenced back lawns and came out on the main road. Not safe enough. He kept his eyes on the intersection, where the buses travelled more frequently. He pulled it toward him with his eyes because he couldn't run; he had to walk as slowly as anyone watching would expect him to in his jeans and ball shoes.



He should have left the stuff behind, but it had his prints all over, he worried. Pay them back. A thank you note occurred to him—just to the girl, Janice.

He wanted to go home directly and go to sleep, but he took the knapsack to Duane's place first, in the apartment building near his. He shook out the booty on Duane's bed, lied about where he got it, some popper left it behind in the Houses when he came in. Together Duane and Hoop photographed everything and put it online. Hoop didn't care for the items, what? a charger, a small electronic game, a cheap digital recorder, two brand name baby tees from her bed. No lap top, no digital camera.

The baby tees didn't sell. Duane and Hoop split the money, unevenly, and spent it on cafeteria lunches, dumping the ones their mothers prepared.

For days, Hoop listened to the news on AM radio, but there was no mention of 23L. Thank God there was worse news. A robbery on the east end, Scarborough, but he was west, an evacuation of the subway system, x insurgents killed overseas, a fire somewhere. It would have been old news after a day anyway, and really nothing worth mentioning was stolen.

Hoop had made a deal with God underneath the basement stairs that if He got him out of this one, he'd—it had taken Hoop a while to come up with something sufficiently attractive for God to say *deal*—go to church with his mother again, read the Bible cover to cover, pay back seven times the money. He had specified his end of the deal: to escape wasn't enough, he'd need a guarantee that he would never get caught, specifically that word would never get to his mother. For that, he'd have to throw down more money. Does the Lord have a price? He'd give up ball. He'd give up balling. He wouldn't ever take a girl to the Houses, wouldn't touch a girl till he was eighteen, till he was married.

I can get you out, the Lord said, but there will always be someone on your back.

You have to guarantee, Lord Jesus.

Then no deal.
