

6350 words

## Cabin Fever

I could see the liver spots on her hand, the gray roots on the back of her scalp. There were a half dozen pill bottles on her night stand: high blood pressure, osteopenia, arthritis. Some other stuff, women's stuff. I don't keep a close track on all her conditions, but I can see that she isn't what she used to be. Still, there must be more left of her than you would think. You would think that she'd be past all that. I guess crocheting and crosswords, fixing casseroles isn't enough for her. I guess I'm part of the not enough. But she has done what she has done and we have to live through it, the both of us.

I pulled the curtain back enough to see that it had snowed, which was OK with me. I didn't really feel like lying next to her anymore, trying not to roll over, and it gave me a reason to leave the bed. I opened the third drawer down on the dresser, where she arranges my shorts, ironed, folded and stacked according to color. It was Tuesday so I pulled out the blue boxers which were on top, just as they should be. I keep my socks in the bottom drawer, wool socks on the left, dress socks on the right. I sat in the chair by the dresser and pulled some wool socks on, left foot first. In the third drawer to the left of my shorts is where she has been told to put my long underwear. I found them there. She has put my clothes away properly.

I went into the kitchen and put a pot on, then headed into the mud room. I've got a weather station on the wall. She got it for me on sale at Tractor Supply. It said six degrees, so I pulled my Carhartts and snow pacs on, gloves and a hat. I keep the Ariens in a corner by the garage door. That way I can get it out without

backing the car onto the driveway. I hate it when there are tire tracks in the snow before I blow. You can't get rid of them; they'll be there til spring. I like a clean driveway. That's why I get up early, before the paper comes. I want to blow the snow off before they pull in.

I fired up the Ariens and made a pass. Then for a minute or two I just stood there while the four stroke pattered away. I watched the snow flakes falling through the beam of the yard light. Then I shut off the Ariens so I could hear the silence, hear the flakes landing on the snow banks and on my coat, soft as butterflies. Beyond the light was black nothingness, a barren world, any hint of life buried beneath the pure white. This is like death I thought, when the color and sound shuts off.

I stuck out my tongue and tasted the tart bite of each flake. For a moment I was a boy again skating on Perch Lake with Billy Seevers, sticking out my tongue catching snow flakes. I could almost hear the polka music, see the scarved skaters whooshing by. Billy poking me in the ribs in the warming hut, showing me the cigarettes he had pilfered from his mom. Billy Seevers. Whatever made me think of him? Snow flakes? What a scruffy bit of mischief he was. Last I heard he was managing a Big Lots in Little Falls, had four kids and an ex-wife. That was at the twentieth reunion what, twenty-nine years ago? Thirty! My God, his kids would be grown and gone by now with kids of their own. He could be anywhere. Or still in Little Falls.

Sometimes my mind wanders. I'm not sure about myself sometimes.

I fired up the Ariens again. It always takes three pulls, but it's a good machine. I've had it twelve years now and it never gives me any trouble. I always start in the middle and work my way out to the sides. First pass is the key, keep it straight and don't wander. If you wander it doesn't come out even; you have to make an extra pass on one side or another. I line myself up on the garage floor control joint and the right side of the tree across the road. It always comes out

even that way. I take pride in that. No wasted motion. But today there was a breeze out of the east so that the snow was blowing back in my face and filling in where I'd already gone on the return pass, so I had to restart on the east side of the driveway and work my way across. It was one more sign of how life is working against me.

I got the snow blown off the driveway and started on the walk. I do that by hand. If I try to blow it I usually don't get the radius quite right and you can see some grass at the edge of the walk. That bothers me. I use a SnowLite twenty inch with a no-stick graphite blade. I paid extra for it, but it's easy to push and it keeps wet snow from sticking. You're too fussy, she says. A shovel is just a shovel, she says. A job worth doing is a job worth doing well, I say.

After shoveling the front walk I get back to blowing snow. I keep a path open around the side of the house where I stack the firewood. Lodgepole Pine cut exactly fourteen inches so it fits front to back in my fireplace. Around the side of the house is where I'd spotted her footprints yesterday afternoon. They were still there, of course. And mine, on top of hers going and under hers coming.

See, last night I came home from having a couple down at Foresters and she wasn't there. At home, I mean. Her car was in the garage, but she was gone. She knows she's not supposed to go anywhere without telling me first, so naturally I wondered what was up. I mean, just what the heck was up with that? I'm sure you can see my point.

I took my phone out and called her. Maybe she's in trouble, I thought. Maybe she had an emergency. Better give her the benefit of the doubt, I thought. That's when I heard her phone ringing in the bedroom. Her phone was on the dresser. That got me really steamed. See, she's not supposed to leave the house without her phone. That way I can check up on her. Just to make sure she is OK, I mean. So there I was standing in the bedroom with my phone in my hand and hers on

the dresser, all lit up and playing *You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling*. You know, the old Righteous Brothers song? That's what plays on her phone when I call. I always liked that song, too.

Her car was in the garage, so I figured she must have left with a friend. I started pacing, I can tell you. I went into the kitchen to fix myself a drink, just two fingers, to take the edge off. We keep our liquor on the bottom shelf next to the refrigerator. When I bent down to get the bottle I noticed some dust under the toe kick. When I inspected the floor more closely I could see streaks she had left with the mop. I started for the broom closet where we keep the mop so that I could clean up the mess she had left. But then I thought, why should I have to clean up her mess? What would she learn if I was always cleaning up after her? I could clean it up and tell her about it when she got home, but that wouldn't mean much to her. She needed to see it for herself. Cleaning up her own mess would be a lesson for her. After all, it's her kitchen. I was sitting on the couch thinking about what I would tell her. About the rules. About how her breaking the rules made me feel. About the kitchen floor. It was a lot to talk about. I had to be careful how I approached it, how I prioritized our talk.

There's been a lot to talk about since she got back from her sister's. I never have liked Irene. Divorced three times and says men are only good for one thing. She'd be happy if men lived on one side of town and women on the other. They can get together on Saturday night, she says. Other than that she's got no use for them. Us, I mean. I can picture her sitting at her kitchen table smoking a roll your own, dressed in Levis and flannel, red hair flailing every which way, talking her trash. A man hater is what she is. I guess she has her reasons. She's had some bad luck in the romance department. But Jesus, give it a rest once in a while Irene.

She could be something special if she would soften up a little, put on some lipstick and get rid of the flannel. Truth is she's a looker. I've thought about her,

about knocking on her door on a Saturday night. Got her nose in the air, though. She's so contrary that she even ruins a good fantasy. Moved to Portland last year. Said Boise was too backward for her. She needed to be around progressive minded people she said. When she says progressive she means the gays.

Anyhow, instead of driving down to Boise for the day, now she has to go to Portland to visit Irene. Spends a week with her and all of her gay friends. No kidding! She told me Irene lives in a building full of them. Has them over to dinner. It gives me the creeps to think about it. Who knows what goes on there? Could be having orgies for all I know. But hey, what can I do? She's in Portland with her sister. It's completely out of my control.

So she gets back from Portland and it's like she's been brainwashed. Suddenly our little town isn't good enough for her anymore. She's telling me how there's people of all different colors and nationalities in Portland, like that's a good thing. Then she goes on about the gays, how people are free to live the way God made them and not have to pretend. She says anyone in our town who is at all different, and she can think of at least three people like this, she says, has to hide who they really are. She says that going to Portland was a real eye opener, that it made her realize how backward our town is. And it doesn't end there, she says. It's the whole darn state, she says, and I can see how her eyes are getting bigger. She doesn't even blink when she says this.

I can't tell you how much I hate her sister.

I'm thinking about all this when I hear the furnace come on. That's when I notice that the fire has gone out. See, we heat our house with wood. Nothing upsets me more than the sound of the furnace coming on. She's off somewhere, probably with those three people, telling them how wonderful Portland is and now we're burning propane because she didn't bother to stoke the fire before she left. This is just another example of how she doesn't think about my feelings.

It was when I went out to the woodpile that I first saw her footprints in the snow. I started following them, but I knew where they led. There was only one place they could go. I'd seen how she looked at him, how she'd put her hand on his arm when she talked to him. Even when we were alone she'd bring him up in small ways. Lance is going to Boise and asked did we need anything. Or how she saw Lance painting his house the other day. Or how Lance has such an ego she doesn't think a normal person could put up with him. I knew what she was saying. I kept an eye on her when he was in the room, made sure she didn't cross the line, which she never did. Until now, that is. Now her footprints were in the snow.

As I followed her footprints I planned what I would do when I found them in bed, Lance on top of her, her legs wrapped around him. At least there would be no denying it, no pretending on her part. Lance would jump off of her when I busted in, say something lame like he was sorry or he didn't mean for it to happen. Go ahead and finish it, I'd say. It's what she wants, I'd say. She'd be whimpering, trembling with fear and humiliation. Or I could shove the muzzle of my 38 up his ass. Go ahead, Lance, make my day, I'd say, calm and raspy. I'd stand there strong and silent, squinty-eyed, daring her to say something.

Of course, I didn't do any of that. For one thing, I didn't have my gun, so that scenario was out. Sometimes what we think we're going to do and what we actually do are two different things. It isn't an easy thing to burst into another man's bedroom where you think your wife is. A part of you can't wait to catch her, but another part isn't in a hurry at all. Once I catch her that would be it; there would be consequences, repercussions. I had followed her footprints to Lance's house, I knew she was in his house, but I didn't actually know one hundred per cent what was going on. I knew all right, but on the other hand I didn't know. I mean, as long as I didn't actually catch them in the act I didn't have to do anything about it. Eventually Lance would get tired of her and things

could go back to the way they'd always been. But if I barged in, well, that would be that. I'd have to divorce her for sure. I started thinking about all the mac and cheese I'd be eating, about watching *Dancing With the Stars* alone. Ironing and folding. Mopping the kitchen floor.

What I did was sneak up on Lance's porch and peek in the window. Which I couldn't do because the blinds were closed. So I stood and listened, but there was no sound. I listened at what I thought was the master bedroom window, sure I would hear grunts and gasps. A shriek or two, bed springs. Nothing. I couldn't imagine what they were doing in there, it was so quiet. Probably they were finished, and she was sleeping in Lance's arms. I worried that they would discover me there, spying on them. Sneaking around catching glimpses. Look at the pathetic thing, Lance, she'd sneer. He'd look at me over his shoulder and snigger. I tiptoed off the porch and came back home.

I fixed myself another drink. Then I started pacing. I couldn't sit still. My mind was racing. I was thinking about what I would say to her when she got home. I'm on to you, I'd say. Your little gambit is over, I'd tell her. The jig is up. She'd be so humiliated that she wouldn't say a word. She'd stand there with her chin on her chest, tears of remorse puddling the floor. Then I'd give her some ultimatums. Like no more trips to Portland. I don't want you so much as talking to your sister, I'd say. Send her a card at Christmas, maybe, but nothing more. I could see Irene's hands all over this. "He's no good, you could do better." I could imagine Irene telling her these things. Oh, Irene had poisoned her mind all right. Now she needed some guidance. She needed the strong hand that only a husband can provide. Thinking about all this, everything that had just happened, suddenly made me very tired. I slumped onto the couch, sat hump shouldered in the darkened room.

Ray, you let the fire go out, I heard her say. She walked into the house as if nothing had happened. She had to have seen my footprints in the snow as she

walked back from Lance's house. She would know that I know what she and Lance were up to. She must have come to the same conclusion that I did, that it would be better to pretend nothing had happened. That way there would not be a big fight, no having to storm off to a motel for the night, no calls to attorneys, realtors, financial advisers. That was O.K. with me. I was willing to play that game.

“What's the matter, Ray? You look like you just lost your best friend. You just sit there and I'll get the fire going,” she said. She put a blanket over me and got a pillow and tucked it under my head. “Don't bother yourself, Ray. I'll take care of everything. You just relax, now.” God she was good. You'd never know she'd just been at it with the neighbor. Women are such actresses. But I didn't say a word. I can be an actor, too.

She got the fire going and went into the kitchen. I could hear the refrigerator door open and close, pots and pans rattle, gas burners ignite. Before long she was calling me to the table. We ate silently, with only the sounds of knives and forks scraping, chewing, gulping. People who have been married for any period of time do this. After so many years together what more is there to say. Of course, for us there was plenty to talk about, but the way I saw it was that we had an unspoken agreement not to discuss these things, so there was nothing unusual or suspicious about the way we ate that night. You could almost say it was comfortable, the way we ate in silence.

After dinner we sat on the couch and watched *The Voice*. She likes Janice, the bald black woman. She says she is the best singer by far. “If it's a singing competition, like they say it is, she will win, hands down,” she says. What kind of a woman shaves her head, I'm thinking. Then this picture of a bald Irene pops into my head. I like the country singer, but I don't say anything. She doesn't like anything country. She's had it up to here with country, living in Idaho like she



does, she says. At the end of the show Janice is eliminated. I see a tear on her cheek. She doesn't say a word, just gets up and goes into the bedroom.

That's how our day ended. She went to bed and I stayed on the couch. The TV was on but I wasn't watching it. I was watching the movie in my head. I was watching Lance and her and what that might be. Then I pictured walking in on them, and all the various scenarios that entailed. There were a lot of combinations and permutations to work through, so it took a while. After a couple of hours I got tired of it and went to bed. She was snoring softly, hand wrapped around her neck the way she does.

So this morning as I was clearing the path to the woodpile and I saw our footprints in the snow, hers and mine coming and going from Lance's house, I decided right then and there to do something that will put an end to the pretending. I ran the snow blower over our footprints. I cleared a path all the way between our house and Lance's. Let her pretend about that! I'm thinking. I wonder what she'll have to say about that!

When I get into the kitchen she is at the table with her cup of coffee and a yogurt. She is in her terry cloth robe and pink slippers. The newspaper is open in front of her and she is working on the Sudoku. I pour myself a cup and sit at the table across from her. It's cold out, I say. Six degrees the weather station says, I say. She mumbles a response as she fills in a square. She hasn't heard what I have said, but she has heard my voice and so she utters an acknowledgment. I bet she listens to Lance, I say to myself. I bet she pays attention to him. There was a time when she paid attention to me. She would look at my mouth when I spoke, follow the movement of my lips with her eyes, drink in my voice more than hear it. She would put her index finger to her lips which moved, with just the slightest motion, in unison with mine. I can say that

she was transfixed by me. It was tremendously appealing. But that was a long time ago.

I stare at her as I sip my coffee. What will she do when she sees the path that I have cleared. How will she explain that! I am thinking. Then it occurs to me that she will find a way to turn this on me, to make me the guilty one. Oh, she's good at that! I try to imagine what she might say, but I can't think of anything. Let her try to wiggle out of this one, I say to myself. As I am thinking these things I feel the bitterness growing in me. I can feel myself glaring at her. This is when she looks up.

“What?” she says. “What is it?”

“What is what?” I say.

“The look,” she says. “What is that?”

I shrug my shoulders.

“It's something,” she says. “There's something there,” she says, and goes back to her Sudoku.

“You want eggs?” She says after a while. She asks me this every morning and every morning I say yes. She has fixed me eggs every day of our marriage, and every day of our marriage she has asked me if I want eggs.

“Sure,” I say. “Why not,” I say. “Go ahead and fix me some eggs,” I say.

After breakfast she cleans up the dishes. I am looking at the dust under the toe kick, the mop streaks in the kitchen floor. But I don't say anything. I have more important things to talk about. I'm letting everything go for now. When she sees the path to Lance's house, when there is no more pretending, that is when we will have our talk.

When she is done in the kitchen she goes into the bathroom for about an hour. This she does every day. It is a ritual for her. When she comes out she is a different woman. Every hair is in place. Her wrinkles are hidden. Her lips are bright red, nails polished. Then she goes upstairs to her sewing room. I hear the

radio playing up there, while she sews. She listens to public radio. I don't mind, as long as she does it upstairs. Just don't bring that stuff downstairs, I tell her. Leave that stuff upstairs and we'll get along, I tell her.

It's Tuesday, so I go out to the garage. Tuesday is when I clean the garage and detail her car and the truck. It takes me longer than usual because she has spilled coffee on the floor mat. When I am done with the cars I back them out and scrub the garage floor. If only she kept the kitchen this clean, I say. It takes several hours in the garage. I am rearranging tools in my workshop when I see her out the window. She is walking toward Lance's house on the path that I have cleared. She is not walking furtively. She is walking as if she thinks nothing of it, what she has been doing. But I am thinking something of it. I am thinking plenty. She sees me through the window and waves.

What kind of a woman would wave at her husband? I am thinking. Maybe she is losing it. Maybe this has something to do with the pills on her nightstand. That Lance, taking advantage of her like that. He is less than I thought he was. She needs my help, I tell myself. If you love her you will help her, I tell myself. But first I have to finish in the garage.

“Thanks for clearing me a path,” she says. “It was tough walking through the snow. I was thinking that if it snowed much more I might not be able to get to Lance's house,” she says.

“You could drive around,” I say. I am busy rearranging tools. I am not looking at her. I am not betraying anything.

“Yeah,” she says. “I guess I could, but it's a lot closer to walk,” she says.

I am feeling a tightness in my chest. My tongue feels swollen in my mouth, my throat is dry. I try to swallow, but I don't have any spit.

“You and Lance having fun over there?” I say. Then I look at her. I try to smile, but it feels more like a sneer.

“What?” She says. Then she says it's been a long winter and she guesses we'll get through this one, just like we've gotten through all the other winters. She mutters this last part to something on the floor. Then she stands there for a while, staring at me while I straighten up the work bench.

“Hey Ray, you want to come with me?” she says.

“Where?” I say.

“To Lance's,” she says. “You could stand to get out for a while,” she says.

“You've been too cooped up, here in the house every day.”

Her eyes are fixed on mine. She smiles faintly, inscrutably, like the Mona Lisa. It is then that I realize how far gone she is. She can't be held accountable, I say to myself. But I am curious how far she will take it, what kind of depravity she has in mind.

“Sure,” I say. “Why not,” I say. “Let's go.”

She takes me by the hand and leads me on the path I cleared this morning. I'll admit that I was nervous, not knowing what I was in for. See, the thing about Lance is that he isn't just your ordinary neighbor. He was drafted by the 49ers and played three games at linebacker before he blew out his knee. At least that is what he says. I couldn't find anything about him on the internet, but he looks the part and he has everyone in town convinced. Who am I to say otherwise? But I have hunted with him and I can say that I have seen him carry a quartered elk three miles over two ridge lines in a snowstorm. He is definitely a man's man, whether he played football or not. What I am saying is that I was feeling a little over matched, following her to Lance's. I was thinking that I should have my gun. But what would she think of me if I had let go of her hand, told her that I needed to get something, then show up with the thirty-eight on my hip?

This is the first time I have been in Lance's house. I notice how clean it is, how orderly. The green and pink floral print on the sofa and chairs matches the

colors in the still life painting over the fireplace. There is a vase with artificial flowers on the dining room table. There are even curtains. The curtain fabric is the same as the sofa. His living room looks like a furniture store display. You can see the lines in the plush carpet from where he has vacuumed. Everything is neat and orderly. No dishes in the sink, no clutter on the coffee table where there are copies of Men's Fitness and Outdoor Sportsman magazines neatly laid out next to a pottery bowl filled with pine cones. I feel a sense of comfort sweep over me.

I hear a cat meowing and find her in the kitchen opening a can of cat food. A large brindle Persian is rubbing against her leg, back and forth, meowing and purring. "I see you're making yourself right at home here," I say to her, "almost like you own the place."

She looks at me, here eyes cold and remote. "Cat's hungry," she says. "Even cats need to be fed."

"Yeah, I can see that," I say. "But it's not your cat, is it?"

"Jesus! Ray...." is all she says, shaking her head. She puts the cat's dish on the floor and I can hear the smacking slurping noise of it eating. And then I think: What kind of a man owns a cat? I am going to say this out loud to her when I remember about Lance, that he is somewhere in the house.

This is when she takes me by the hand and says, "Come with me Squirrely Man. I've got just what you need." She leads me down the hallway to a room with a king size bed. There is a painting over the bed of a bull elk on a timbered ridge bugling. It is obvious that this is Lance's room. She takes off her shoes and pulls the bedspread back. Then she takes off her pants, blouse and bra, and climbs into bed with just her panties on. So this is their game, I am thinking, for him to watch us. I am fine with that. This could be fun, I say to myself. I sit on the side of the bed and carefully remove my clothing. I put my socks inside of my shoes so that they won't touch the carpet where the cat has been, then fold my trousers and shirt and put them on top of my shoes. I am not too happy about this, but it

is the best that I can do. While I am undressing I am looking around, trying to spot Lance's hiding place. There really isn't any place for him to be hiding, but I know that somehow he is watching.

“This is kind of exciting, isn't it Ray!” she says. “Kind of like a mini-vacation. Our own little getaway.”

“Sure,” I say. “It's probably even more exciting for you,” I say.

“Why is that, Ray?” she says, snuggling up to me.

But I don't want her to know that I am onto their scheme. This is the most romantic she has been in ages, and I am getting excited myself. Being with her like this is almost the same as being with another woman. That is how I am thinking of her, as someone else's wife. She kisses me passionately and I am wanting her more than I have ever wanted her. I am inside her and moving in and out slowly, to make it last. I am thinking that Lance must be enjoying this. I try to imagine him watching, but I can't think where he would be. Then it comes to me, he's not in the room at all! He has cameras set up and he could be anywhere. Watching me. She is moaning now and her pelvis is thrusting. This is it! We're almost there! I start to thrust faster, harder. We're putting on a show now, I am thinking. This is how it's done Lance! I am thinking. But then I think: what if he posts it on the internet? Then it's not just her and Lance in on it, the whole world could be watching. My God, I am thinking, this is getting out of hand!

Her moaning becomes plaintive. “Ooohh?!” she whimpers, but I have been thinking too much. I hold her tighter and pump furiously, trying to regain my passion, but it is too late. I shrink to nothing and slide out of her.

I lie silent on top of her for a long time, too embarrassed to move. Rolling off of her will signal the acceptance of defeat, prompt some comment. But finally I move to my side of the bed. “It's O.K. Ray. It happens to the best of them,” she

says, and she strokes my hair lazily. “I thought the change of scenery might help you.”

I think of the cameras rolling, my public humiliation. What must Lance think of me now? Then I feel the anger rising inside of me. What does she expect, I am thinking. It is too much pressure, performing for a crowd. I am no porn actor. Then I

become disgusted, thinking about her and Lance and how they have tricked me into playing their vile game. I sit up and begin to dress. I stand up to pull my pants on. I am buckling my belt when I can no longer contain my rage.

“Where is he?” I spit the words at her.

“Who, Ray? Where is who?”

“You know who!” I yell.

“You mean Lance?”

“Yes Lance for Christ's sake? Who else would I be talking about?”

“Portland. Lance is in Portland.”

“Portland! What do you mean he is in Portland?”

“I mean he is in Portland. He has friends there. He goes to visit them every few months. I'm taking care of his cat while he is gone. What did you think, Ray?”

I feel a coldness radiate out from my solar plexus, weakening my legs and draining my energy. I collapse onto the bed, sitting with a sock in my hand and turn toward her.

“Does he know Irene?”

As I hiss the words I notice the photograph on the night stand next to her. It is a photo of Lance and his hunting partner Phil, a photo I took of them, actually, several years ago in our elk camp in Emerald Creek Meadows. We had just set up camp and broken out the Jack Daniels. It was a crisp October evening. An elk was bugling on a ridge above us. We had a roast and potatoes in the dutch oven. It was one of those moments that you want to keep forever, and here was the

proof of it, the photo of Lance and Phil with their arms around each other, tents and fire ring and lodgepole pine in the background, grins as big as all of Idaho. Still, it seemed an odd placement of the photo, on his nightstand.

“He's met her,” she says. “I don't know if you could say that they really know each other.”

“It figures that she would be behind this,” I say.

“Behind what, Ray? What on earth are you talking about?”

“You know damn well what I am talking about,” I shout at her. “I'm talking about you and Lance. I'm no fool! And now Irene's a part of it, too? I hope the three of you enjoy your little show, but by God there will be a price to pay for it!”

I am so full of adrenaline I can barely make it back to the house. I pour myself some scotch, just two fingers, to calm my nerves. I need something to do, something to occupy my mind and hands so I get my thirty-eight out and the gun cleaning kit from the garage, turn the TV on, pour myself another drink and sit on the couch. The Voice is on and somehow that bald woman, Janice, is back on singing some bluesy song. I have to admit that she isn't half bad, and she has a rack on her. I get to working on the gun and start feeling better. I decide I can use one more drink, just a splash this time. When I get the bottle out from the bottom cupboard I notice the dust and mop marks still there on the kitchen floor. I just can't stand it anymore. When she comes in I'm on my hands and knees, cleaning under the refrigerator.

“What are you doing, Ray?” She says.

“Something I've been meaning to talk to you about,” I say. As I say this she sees the thirty-eight on the coffee table.

“Why is your gun out, Ray? You know I don't like having it in the house,” she says.



I walk over to the table and pick up the gun, just let it hang by my side. “Actually, there are a lot of things I've been meaning to talk to you about,” I say. I can hear the anger in my voice.

Her eyes get real big and I can see the fear in them. I can't help but laugh; she thinks I'm going to shoot her! Any idiot knows you don't clean a loaded gun. My laughing scares her so much she begins to tremble. That is when I see that things are getting out of control, so I try to comfort her.

“I cleaned the kitchen floor for you,” I say. She doesn't seem to hear me, so I say it again. “I cleaned the kitchen floor for you, under the fridge where you missed it. I was going to make you clean it; how can you learn if I always clean behind you, after all? But I did, I cleaned it for you, so you wouldn't have to.” I smile as I say this, so she can see that I mean well. We are standing there, looking at each other from across the room. The furnace comes on and I remember the fire. A door slams upstairs. I hear the air whistling around its edges.