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DENNIS MCFADDEN

Bye Baby Bunting

“Daveman the Caveman” his wife, Deb, had taken to calling him, for all the time he spent in the cellar. He’d never had a nickname in his life, and he wasn’t particularly fond of this one. Not that he suspected Deb cared. Their indifferent coexistence was becoming an art form.

The cellar was unfinished. Mortar dust crumbled from the damp stone walls, dusting the cobwebs and the hard dirt floor. Dave’s workshop, through a doorway under the stairs, had once been the root cellar beneath the kitchen. Over the work table a lightbulb hung beside a high, ground-level window, and a tattered easy chair sat in the corner. Around the floor, up the walls, on the far reaches of the table, sat twenty-odd dollhouses, many of which had been finished at one time, but never quite the way he wanted, never quite good enough, before being cannibalized for the next model. His workshop suited him fine—except for the cat, the little pain in the ass forever invading his privacy. Mr. Whiskers for his part saw no reason why the cellar, his hunting grounds—for he was an excellent mouser still—should not be exclusively his domain.

Dave was in the cellar when the call came in. Just after dark, early June, rain splashing mud outside the cellar window above his work table. He was repainting the trim around the interior living room windows, using a tiny brush at impossible angles, a tedious job for which his callused roofer’s hands had little patience.

He heard the phone ring, then Deb’s step on the cellar stairs. She was still wearing her blue lab coat from the hospital, and her limp yellow hair needed washing, though he noticed only from the corner of his eye. She put her hand on his shoulder like an old pal, watching him work.

“Lorrie called,” she said. Lorrie worked with her in X-ray. “She heard on the scanner some kid’s lost in the woods out past Chapel Cemetery. They got volunteers going in looking for him. She knows you hunt out there.”

He withdrew the tiny brush, dabbed it in paint, inserted it again. “Oh yeah?”

She withdrew her hand. “In case you feel like getting out of the cellar.”

He listened to her climb the stairs. He heard a grumble from Mr. Whiskers, saw him crouched in the dark corner beneath the table, watching his every move. The cat held him in utter contempt, a feeling that was utterly mutual. Dave refused to accord Mr. Whiskers the dignity of the name—bestowed by his daughter, whose cat he’d been before she died—so he called him “Whiskers” when he was in a charitable mood, or “Mr. Shithead,” or, simply, “you little pain in the ass,” when he wasn’t. For his part, Mr. Whiskers enjoyed leaping upon the work table, sauntering across it just as Dave was engaged in a particularly delicate operation, maybe threading a tiny wire through a tiny hole in a tiny wall, and batting to the floor the next tiny tool Dave was about to reach for. There was nothing affectionate about their contempt.

Occasionally their disputes became physical. Dave was known to sweep Mr. Whiskers rudely off the table. The cat was known to swipe at Dave, usually when the element of surprise was on his side, at an exposed ankle or arm, usually during one of the delicate operations, often drawing blood. Upon those occasions, Dave gave chase, and, if he were able to catch him—a more frequent occurrence now that Mr. Whiskers was getting a little long in the tooth—took him by the scruff of the neck, and bowled him across the cluttered cellar floor toward a distant corner, scattering miscellaneous boxes, buckets, boards, or other debris. He couldn’t quite bring himself to wring the little bastard’s neck, or take him for a one-way ride in the country. He had, after all, been Janey’s cat.

It took him five minutes to clean his brush, seal the paint can, cat-proof the table top. Upstairs he put on a flannel shirt over his black

Harley tee, laced up his work boots, selected from the hallway shelf the camo trucker's cap he judged most rain-resistant. Took the keys to his pick-up from the little table top. "Okay," he said to Deb, who was standing by the kitchen sink, arms folded.

"Come here," she said. Dave crossed the kitchen. "You're still wearing your potato chips." She brushed at his bushy brown beard.

"Thanks." He almost kissed her on the cheek. She almost waited for him to.

"Good luck," she said, turning toward the dirty dishes.

Dave drove to the Rod and Gun Club, parked in back, away from the street, walked in shaking rain from his hat, sat at the bar, ordered a Rolling Rock. She'd never asked where he was going. Let her assume what she would. The Pirates were on the TV above the bar, the beer was cold, there were pickled eggs in the jar by the cash register. His evening was pretty much planned.

He'd lost a kid once. No one had helped him search.

One of the customers at the bar was his father-in-law, Al Black, who returned Dave's nod by way of greeting. Al scowled, but it was nothing personal; it was his natural expression. Business was slow for a Friday, a couple of young couples playing pool. Missy was tending bar, but she didn't chat either, only brought him his beer, took his money, and returned to the scanner beside the pickled egg jar, where she stood listening, her back to Dave. A message crackled out of the little black box, but he couldn't make it out. Missy was wearing jeans, flimsy denim. She had a gorgeous ass.

The sound on the game was low. The others watched it like a fire. Dave listened to the announcers' murmur, the sporadic low crackle of the scanner, the pool balls' clacking, the quiet chatter of the players. The beer was going to his head. He found himself staring outright at Missy's ass, watching how when she moved the denim clung to every curve and crevice. When she went into the kitchen, he found himself equally hypnotized by the second hand on the big, bright, Iron City Beer clock on the wall above the bar. The game he couldn't bring himself to watch. His beer was empty, even though it seemed he'd been

there only a minute, so he ordered another when Missy returned.

She slid the bottle toward him. "You hear about the Gilhousen kid?"

"Tim Gilhousen?" A member of the Club, younger than Dave. Nice enough guy, a truck driver, quick to laugh.

"Yeah. His little boy disappeared in the woods up behind their place this afternoon. He was out playing with the dogs, they went inside for a minute, bang, he's gone, him and the dogs."

"How old is he?"

"Three, three-and-a-half."

"That's a shame. Hope he's all right."

"There's a bunch of people out looking for him."

Dave drummed his fingers on the bar beside his change. "Hope they find him."

Missy said, "Don't you hunt up in there? Out past Chapel Cemetery?"

"I hunt up in there, yeah. A lot of people hunt up in there."

Al's scowl deepened. Missy went back to the scanner, facing Dave now so he couldn't see her ass. He watched the second hand on the clock. He should ask Al why he wasn't up there searching for the Gilhousen kid if he was so concerned, but he knew the answer. Al's knee was bad, so bad he couldn't walk anymore without a cane. Couldn't even hunt anymore. Couldn't do much of anything anymore, except drink. Dave sometimes wondered what kept his father-in-law going, but he supposed he knew the answer to that, too. It was Janey, Dave's lost kid. His daughter—Al's granddaughter—had been killed three years before by a bunch of drunken, drugged-up kids, two of whom turned out to be remorseless, real punks, the ringleaders. They'd gotten off on manslaughter, ten to fifteen years. Al, it was assumed by most who knew him, was determined to live long enough to impose a more realistic sentence when they got out.

Dave, for one, didn't think he'd make it. He watched his father-in-law order another shot and beer, watched him suck the shot in a single gulp into his nearly toothless face, saw the grimace, like taking bad medicine. Dave seldom thought of the punks, except when he saw Al; sometimes Janey was so gone it was as though she'd never been

there. How she'd loved Al, back in the days before Al had gone to seed, back when he'd been loud and friendly and funny. Dave thought he'd been a good father to Janey, a strict, no-nonsense father, sure, but a good one, trying to do the right thing. He was staring at the second hand again. He remembered Janey's hand going around in circles. She'd been slow, learning-disabled. The habit began just after she was born, died with her fifteen years later, her hand going round and round in little circles against her mother's skin, her leg, tummy, back, never stopping, as if to stop would be to lose touch.

Taking a gulp of his Rolling Rock, he grimaced like Al. Tasted like piss. Must have been a skunky batch, that happened now and then at the God and Run Club, probably forgot a case in the corner, let it sit a few months going bad. What the hell. He didn't much care for baseball anyway. Gathering his change, he left without a word, without a nod.

Main Street was deserted, stores closed, rain pelting the bricks of the sidewalks. His wiper blades were shot; he'd been meaning to change them. He turned down Pershing Street, over the bridge past Proud Judy's, deciding not to stop there, too many cars, too many kids, too loud. Heading out toward Irishtown, he pulled in at the Pub Bar, hesitated, pulled out again. It was Al's hangout, probably his next stop. Down Mill Street by the creek, he headed south, out of town. Up the big hill past Chapel Cemetery, he turned left on Shugars Road.

He didn't know exactly where Gilhousen lived, but he didn't have to. In front of the garage, up and down the dirt road, were a dozen pickups, two Hartsgrove Volunteer Fire Department trucks, three State Police cars. Pulling in behind the farthest, Dave stepped from the cab and heard, through the drumming rain, the hum of four-wheelers from the woods.

Three men stood in the drive backlit by the spotlight on the garage. He recognized the fire chief talking to a man he knew he should know, and a state cop he'd never seen. "No luck yet?" he said to the chief. The light was in his eyes, rain dripping from the bill of his cap.

"Not yet. Nothing."

“What’s the plan?” Dave said.

“Got a lot of guys searching on four-wheelers, a few fellows in there on foot.”

“Folks keep straggling in,” said the cop. “Like you. Trying to point ‘em all in different directions.”

“I don’t get the four-wheelers,” Dave said. “How they gonna hear the kid yelling?”

The chief shrugged. “Figure he’ll make himself seen, if they get close enough.”

“Hope so,” the other man said.

“What if he don’t?” Dave said.

Across the yard, a woman stood under the porch light. Dave recognized the shadowed face of Gillhousen’s wife, the kid’s mother. She held a phone at her waist, like a cocked pistol, pointed toward the black woods beyond the yard.

Taking his flashlight from his glove box, Dave climbed the roadside bank, crossing a field next to the back yard, then into the woods. The flashlight cast a feeble beam against the dark. Fog had begun to come up. Could have brought his heavy-duty lamp, if only he’d known he was coming. The trees offered little shelter from the rain, which slapped the leaves louder than his steps, louder than the sound of the four-wheelers. The carpet of decay underfoot was soggy and slippery, the wetness filling him with a raw, fecund smell.

Up the hillside through the woods he followed a meandering trail, around undergrowth, thick patches of laurel and saplings, the same trail a deer would follow. Or dogs. His flashlight faltered, then brightened again, and he realized the battery wouldn’t last. He’d have to conserve. He’d have to turn it off, walk in the dark. He could memorize the path to the beam’s end, turn the light off and walk it, turn it on again to memorize the next piece. Dave fixed his route in his mind: around the low branches, past the thicket, through the trees. Avoid the fallen log to the left. Clicked off the light.

For a second the shattering of the rain was thunderous, the blackness complete. A surge of panic, sudden blindness. Turned the light on, then off again just as quickly. He could do this. Took a breath, a

step. Hesitantly, following the trail in his mind, heeding the sogginess underfoot, one step at a time, slowly, then a bit faster. He hadn't gone ten feet when he slipped and fell.

Switching on the light, he saw the rock, now exposed and shiny where his boot had slid the leaves. Standing, he made his way to the log, sat. Turned off the light. Couldn't see his hand in front of his face. He tried, waving it there. Might have seen a motion, blacker than the rest of the blackness. Nothing hurt, and he was no wetter than he had been before. Drenched was drenched. On the log, he stretched his leg, wrung some water from his beard. And asked himself, what the hell was he doing here?

"BILLY!" he yelled.

Nothing but the drumming of the rain, and, lower now, more distant, the sound of the four-wheelers. What was he doing here? It was a no-win situation. But then weren't most situations? If no one found the kid, if a bear found him first, if he fell, hit his head and died, then, certainly, the kid—if he'd lived—would have grown up to find a cure for cancer. But if they rescued him, just as surely he'd grow up worthless, probably into some drug-addled punk like the ones who killed Janey. Or worse, a lawyer.

He rubbed his hand in little circles on his drenched thigh.

He stood. He was here. He was where he was. Maybe there was a good reason, maybe there wasn't. The trick was not to think about it. The trick was don't try to convince yourself of anything, one way or the other, because you can never be sure when you're lying. Unzipping, he pissed into the dark, splattering louder than the rain. Then he turned the light back on.

The fog was thicker, bouncing back a brightness that blinded him for an instant. The forest was frozen on the other side of the light, indistinct, like an idea of woods, not like the real thing at all. Nothing was like the real thing at all. "BILLY!"

He memorized the next piece of path, turned the light off, tried again. He'd been in the woods all his life, even at night a few times—the time they took his little brother's friend snipe hunting. He could handle it. He was a hunter. He'd bagged a buck—at least one—every

year since he was nine. How different could hunting and searching be? Breathing the fog, the wet smell brought an icy feeling, and he began to feel a chill, the heat leaving his body. Tripping, he stumbled but didn't fall, made his way to the spot he believed to be the end of his memorized trail, turned the light back on. Surrounded again by the glimpse of unreal woods, swirling in ghost-colored fog.

"BIIL-LYYY!" This was how he climbed the hill.

Down the other side, the sound of the four-wheelers was only a suggestion. More distant now? Or had they gone in, maybe found the boy? Or was it just the rain, heavier, louder, drowning out the other sounds? How far had he come? How far would he go? Walking in the dark, tripping, stumbling, frequently falling, ignoring the bruises, the scratches from the branches he walked into face-first. He saw his father-in-law, his hollow face sucking whiskey, saw his snarl, his accusing eyes. Knew Al blamed him for Janey's death. Knew Deb did too.

He walked in the dark to the end of the trail in his mind, turned on the light, yelled, memorized, walked in the dark. A mile, two miles into the woods, he judged, maybe an hour since he went in.

Stopping at the edge of the blackness, he flashed on the light. There stood a man, watching him out of the fog.

The flashlight nearly bounced from his hand, his skin caught in a clutch of chills. The man was standing ten feet before him, under an evergreen canopy funneling rain like a waterfall. He held an umbrella over his head. He was wearing a white shirt beneath a vest that failed to cover his fat front where a prominent cross was displayed, and a frightened, lost look on his face. It took Dave a moment to recognize him.

"Francis?"

"Dave?"

"Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me."

"Boy am I glad to see you."

"What the hell are you doing out here?" Dave had moved closer, close enough to see the perplexed look on Francis's face at the question, followed by a look of hurt.

"Looking for Billy Gilhousen."

"In your dress-up clothes? With an umbrella?"

Soaked as he was, he still held the umbrella. "I have to go to work at eleven." Francis was night manager at the Truck Stop. Dave knew him from church, though he hadn't seen him there in three years; Dave hadn't been to church since Janey's funeral.

"Where's your light?" Dave said.

"Battery wore out. I guess. It stopped working. Had it in my back pocket, but I fell down and busted it."

"Jesus." Perhaps it was the utterance that made Dave notice anew the large, wooden crucifix Francis wore hanging from his neck. He'd always worn it, as long as he'd known him. A religious nut, Dave had concluded early, though he'd always liked the man.

"Hurt my butt," said Francis.

"I don't wonder." Dave turned off his flashlight.

In the sudden blackness, Francis grabbed his arm. "What are you doing?"

"Saving the battery."

Rain slapping leaves in the moment of silence. "Oh." Francis released his arm.

Dave explained how it was done, walking in the dark from memory between bouts of illumination. He turned on the light. "Okay. We head down the slope here, between those two trees, remember where that stump's at, around, towards that laurel patch. Fairly clear, not too bad. We'll stop up there and look again. There's a ravine not too far down, if I'm where I think I am—little creek at the bottom. Got it?"

"I think so," Francis said.

"Stay close." Then he yelled, "BIIII-LYYYY!"

Francis caught on. "BIIII-LYYYY!" he yelled.

They listened for a moment to nothing but rain. Dave doused the light, they headed out. "Stay close," he repeated.

Francis said, "What do you suppose the odds are of you finding me?"

Dave thought about it. "About the same as me having venison in my freezer, I guess."

"But there's lots of deer out here. Only one of me."

"That's probably the same thing that buck in my freezer was thinking."

Francis was quiet. Dave wasn't interested in odds, which were nevertheless on his mind; he was interested only in getting through, finishing. In the racket of the rain he couldn't tell how close Francis was keeping, but thought he heard clumsy footfalls not far behind. At the edge of the void, he flashed on the light; Francis was maybe halfway down the path, coming sluggishly through the fog, cross-first.

"Stay *close*," said Dave, waiting.

Francis caught up. Dave pointed the light down the slope, through the trees, scoping out their next route. "What do you suppose the odds are of us finding the kid?" Francis said.

Annoyed, Dave wanted to say slim and none. Instead, he called again, "BIIL-LYYY!"

When Francis didn't repeat the shout this time, Dave yelled again. "GAAA-AWD!" It was spontaneous, surprising himself.

Francis caught on. "JEEE-SUS!" he yelled.

Seeing Francis's smile, Dave almost smiled himself. He put a hand to his ear, listening. "Nothing out there."

"They're out there," Francis said.

Dave flicked off the light. He stepped into the blackness, leaving Francis to follow. God could guide him. Before Janey's funeral, Francis and his wife Mary Anne had visited them at home, bringing comfort and an over-done casserole. Mary Anne had gushed and preached, Francis letting her do most of the talking. It had been apparent they'd steeled themselves for the mission, meaning to be pillars for Dave and Deb in their time of need. Sure enough, the tears had flowed, but it had been Francis who'd broken down, sobbing, followed by Mary Anne at the sight of her husband. Deb had been obliged to comfort them both. Dave had left the room, for the cellar and Janey's dollhouse.

Reaching out in the blackness, Dave felt the sapling's slimy bark, just about where he'd memorized it. He thought he heard the rain thrumming on Francis's umbrella, thought he heard him shuffling through the undergrowth. It wasn't that Dave didn't believe in God. Nor that he believed that if there were a God, it was necessarily one who didn't believe in him, a neglectful God, or a God who tested his faith. He remembered a sermon of Father Bill's comparing life to on-

the-job training, God seeing what we could do with this tiny speck of dirt in the universe before He turned it all over to us. Good a theory as any, Dave supposed. But what did it have to do with him?

The hill steepened. He hadn't noticed the sharper decline from above. His boots slipped in the soggy footing, he was sliding, through brambles, over fallen branches and rocks. Digging in his heels, he finally stopped. Turned on the light. Must have gone beyond his planned path, or strayed from it. He'd slid at the top of the ravine, stopping himself maybe halfway down, before it became even steeper. Near the little creek the fog was thicker, his sphere of illumination reduced to the inside of a milky globe. Francis was nowhere in sight.

"FRANCIS!" No answer. He climbed out of the ravine. Old trees here, stout black trunks in the fog, and he stood for a moment taking his bearings. Removing his hat, limp and drenched, he turned his face to the black sky, letting the rain wash over it. He pointed the light in every direction. "FRAAAN-CIS!" The irritating monotony of the pounding rain made him grit his teeth behind his beard.

"BIILL-LYYY!" No luck with that one either.

"GAAAAWD!" Dave sat on a log and laughed.

He didn't know how long afterwards it was, he'd lost track of time, traveling further along the edge of the ravine, using the same, on-again, off-again, light and dark method, trying to decide when to give it up, when enough would be enough. Weariness weighed on his body as well as his mind, his thighs growing heavy, his back tired. He stopped and yelled for Billy again and again, and the last time he yelled it, a small, clear voice answered out of the rain and blackness: "I'm down here."

A cascade of chills crossed his skin and his breath caught high in his chest, a revelation, biblical in proportion, the purest, most singular sensation he would ever feel in his life.

He shone the light down into the ravine, at the little, white-headed boy looking up from the edge of the void.

"Who are you?" the boy said. "Where's my daddy at?"

The words tripped over his chattering teeth, he was shaking, wearing only a tee shirt and jeans. Two dogs slouched at his feet, shivering

beneath matted coats. “Gotcha,” said Dave, picking the boy up, wrapping his wet flannel shirt around him. Four steps took him across the swollen creek, and he climbed the other side, dogs close behind.

Afterwards, he would remember little of the trip out, fueled by adrenaline and ecstasy, eased by the luxury of the constant, dying light—no need now to conserve—the boy clutched to his chest, growing warm. The woods grew familiar, he came to a field he knew, through more woods, out to an old logging trail he’d often followed before. Fog thinned to wisps. Half a mile down, the trail came out on Shugars Road. He flagged down a pickup going by, an old farmer he didn’t know. The dogs hopping in back, he climbed into the warm cab with the boy, out of the rain at last. Five minutes later they were at Gilhousen’s.

He carried Billy across the yard, to a flurry of cries and shouts, the old farmer leading the way. Shadows converging, back-lit by the lights from the garage and house. A small crowd, the two dogs trying wearily to celebrate with them. Badges, caps, helmet brims, teeth shining in the darkness, and the boy’s mother was there, face twisted with joy, and a blanket appeared, engulfing the boy, and he was gone. They were carrying him toward the house, the crowd moving as one. They were on the porch. The only creature not celebrating was the cat, who scampered away as though his tail were on fire, dismayed, no doubt, that the dogs had made it out. Dave thought of Mr. Whiskers, the pain in the ass, and gloom clamped down upon his mood. Then he saw his flannel shirt in the mud. He picked it up, and the crowd was gone, swallowed by the house. Alone on the porch, the two dogs lay pointed toward the door.

Francis called next morning, to assure him he’d made it out of the woods just fine, in case he was worried. After he’d lost Dave, he’d waited out the night under a sheltering evergreen, none too worse for the wear, though Truck Stops of America wasn’t happy with him for not calling in. But the good news was, they’d found the boy. The real reason he’d called. He wanted to let Dave know they’d found the boy, in case he hadn’t heard.

That was all he said. "Did they say who found him?" Dave said.

"No," said Francis. "Never thought to ask. The important thing is he's all right. That's one lucky little boy."

Deb was downstairs, vacuuming the living room, unconcerned about waking him. In her gray gym shorts, one of his old tee shirts, her bony arm pumping the vacuum in a monotonous rhythm, she didn't see him in the doorway watching her. Dave felt uneasy, nagged by Francis's call. When Deb turned to reach under the coffee table she noticed him, a near nod, near smile. She kept cleaning.

One lucky little boy. Billy had been, certainly. Then what did that make Dave?

"Want some breakfast?" he said.

Looking up, Deb shrugged. "Sure."

He put on coffee, then sliced some scrapple, started it frying. Took a big yellow bowl, broke in six eggs, added a splash of milk, whipped them with a fork. Breakfast was the only meal he cooked. He liked cooking breakfast. Deb came in in time to butter the toast, and they sat at the table by the tall window looking down the hill, toward the south side of Hartsgrove. Fog was still banked over the creeks at the bottom, but the rain had stopped.

"You make the best scrapple," she said, squeezing on a puddle of syrup.

"You didn't ask me what I did last night."

"You went out in the woods and found the kid."

"Yeah—did you...?"

Seeing the shock on his face, Deb said, "You're shitting me."

Around mouthfuls, between gulps, he told her everything, the rain, the fog, the blackness, walking blind, falling—here he displayed scratches and bruises—finding Francis Minick, losing him again, then, finally, finding the boy. He couldn't describe the feeling he'd had. So that was what he told her, that he couldn't describe the feeling he'd had. An abbreviated version, certainly, but more than he'd talked to her in months, maybe ever, at least in one sitting.

"That's what you do good," she said. "You're a hunter."

"Yeah." Sudden pride lifted the hairs on his neck. Of course.

He wasn't a roofer, a drinker, certainly not a father or husband. He was a hunter.

One lucky little boy meets hunter.

She asked him what happened next. How did the family react seeing their little boy rescued, what did they say to him, how did it feel to be a hero, was it going to be in the paper? He shrugged. No one had said anything so he'd left. Francis said they didn't seem to know who'd found the kid.

Deb was dumbfounded. "Nobody said *anything* to you?"

"No."

"Dave. Didn't you say anything to anybody?"

"They all went in the house, left me alone, so I left. I was beat. It was raining."

"You should have *stayed*. You should have made sure they *knew*."

"What else could I do? She took him right out of my arms."

"You should have held *on* to him! What's the *matter* with you?"

He shrugged. "You mean like, have a tug-o-war with the kid?"

She placed her fork rudely beside her plate, turning to stare out the window. Dave, feeling suddenly empty, ate half a piece of toast in one bite. When she turned back, her eyes were damp, her lips narrow. "You're *never* there. You never get involved. I let Janey go with those kids. You should have *said* something!"

He watched bewildered as she went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. He stared at the door, at her unfinished meal. Then he went down to the cellar.

Mr. Whiskers was waiting on the worktable, guarding the dollhouse, fixing Dave in an unfriendly glare. He tried to sweep him off, but the cat escaped with a hiss, Dave kicking at him, "Little pain in the ass!" He pulled the dollhouse to the front of the table, studied it. It seemed as though he hadn't worked on it in days. Women. There was a hole in his heart too, equal to hers he was sure, but didn't you have to try to let it heal? After all, it had been three years. Three years, one month, and...four days. Wasn't enough enough? Wasn't there a statute of limitations?

After a week, it was apparent he was an unsung hero. He hadn't heard a thing from Gilhousens. The only people who knew he'd rescued Billy were the ones Deb told, two or three at work, who'd nodded politely. She'd given up. Dave never told his boss or the other guys on the job.

In the evenings he dabbled with the dollhouse, did battle with Mr. Whiskers, and convinced himself it didn't matter. What mattered was that Billy was rescued, not that Dave was recognized. But then his problem was that whenever he convinced himself of something, he could never be sure he really believed it. Believing in God, believing he'd been a good father to Janey, believing it didn't matter that his heroism would remain anonymous—did he really believe those things? Or had he just convinced himself it was what he should believe? This was why Dave couldn't be bothered thinking about it.

His heart wasn't in the dollhouse. He was totally unsatisfied with the way it was turning out, yet totally stymied as to what it was lacking.

Then it came to him. In a dream, literally. He woke at two in the morning, a vision of the perfect dollhouse in his mind, the dollhouse that Janey would adore. A Tudor style, thick cardboard reinforced with basswood for the walls, a mixture of paste and paint for a stucco effect—and a garden! With a swing set, a picket fence around the whole thing.

The vision forced him from bed, down to the cellar. For the next three hours, he measured, sketched, sanded and primed a new plywood base, cut the picket fence, sanded, primed, cut, framed the new house out—a man on a mission. He ignored Mr. Whiskers prowling restlessly in the cellar beyond the workshop, the occasional growl of discontent. He never thought of Billy. He never thought of Janey. At five he went back to bed, still high. Her shallow breathing told him Deb was awake, but they let it pass in silence.

At seven he went to work, tired and foggy-headed, but the vision of the dollhouse remained, and he was anxious to get back to it. The baseboards in the colonial he'd built last year would be perfect for the swing set frame. His daydreams overflowed with the textures and colors and angles and aspects of the dollhouse on his table and the one in his mind, measuring the merging of the two in the light from

Janey's glowing face. As soon as he got home, he opened a can of beer, hurried down to the cellar.

On the floor in front of the worktable, the dollhouse lay shattered. On the table where the dollhouse had been, Mr. Whiskers sat grooming himself grandly, ignoring the intruder.

Two weeks to the day after he'd found Billy, Dave was again in the woods at night, behind the Gilhousens' place. He'd parked down Shugars Road where they wouldn't see him, toward the logging trail, and he didn't go into the woods as far, maybe only half a mile, and everything was different. It was dry, comfortable. Ambient moonlight from behind a thin cloud cover was enough—his flashlight never left his pocket.

It was almost mundane, just woods at night, same as daytime, only darker. He followed a deer path through undergrowth to a clearing in a stand of hardwoods, boot steps crunching through the rustlings, peepings, chirpings, squeakings of creatures hidden by the night. It was a different place. The blind, black-and-white, drowning, ghostly, frightening, exhilarating, magical forest of two weeks earlier couldn't have existed. It was almost disappointing.

He set the sack he was carrying—a pillowcase, actually—at his feet on the forest floor. The sack moved. It shifted once, paused, shifted again. It took Mr. Whiskers a minute to free his head from the cloth.

The cat looked up. Dave couldn't see his eyes, squatted for a better look. "How do you like your new home, Mr. Shithead? Tell you what." He pointed through the trees. "If it's not to your liking, there's a family lives right over there about a mile or so, probably welcome you with open arms. They got dogs, at least one cat, but I'm sure they got an opening for another one. I tell you, they're one lucky fucking family. You ought to like it there. You ought to fit right in, cause you're one lucky fucking cat."

He didn't think Deb would mind. Of course he didn't think it till the ride home. If she did mind, she'd get over it. She'd never spoken of Mr. Whiskers except in terms of annoyance, seldom thought to feed him. He thought of it even more seldom, probably what made the cat

such an excellent mouser. Boosting his chances of survival. He was a good hunter.

A good hunter—a common bond. He nearly felt a pang of regret, but opted not to. He drove slowly past Gilhousens', pale beneath a hidden moon, yellow home lights gleaming from the living room windows.

Deb was in bed. She'd been out when he'd left, at her friend Lorrie's bachelorette party down at the Ice House. Lorrie was marrying the guy she'd been living with for 18 years. Deb and Dave slept in the dark, as dark as they could make it, shades pulled tightly, yet there were always two pale, incomplete rectangles defining the walls of the bedroom at night, where the light crept in. He made his way through the darkened clutter to his side of the bed, undressed, got in. Deb was not asleep.

"Daveman. Out of the cellar." She'd been drinking. She wasn't much of a drinker.

"Yeah. Took a ride in the country."

"Oh? Sounds exciting." Just a hint of a slur.

Now was as good a time as any. "You didn't care that much for Mr. Whiskers, did you?"

"Didn't?"

"Mr. Whiskers went for a ride in the country too. Only Mr. Whiskers ain't coming back."

He listened to her breathing. "The caveman," she said.

"I got this great idea for the dollhouse, I was working like crazy on it, and I come home tonight and it's laying there shattered on the floor. I usually push it back in far enough he can't get at it, but I must have forgot."

Sighing, she rolled over roughly, her back to him. "Got some bad news for you, Daveman." He couldn't see her in the dark. She said, "Mr. Whiskers didn't wreck your fucking dollhouse."

Gilhousens were at the Club a week later. Dave and Deb stopped for a beer on their way home from the Harmony Mills Mall where they'd taken in a movie—*Shrek*, which Dave had thoroughly enjoyed,

while pretending not to. It was their first date in years. He'd never mentioned the destroyed dollhouse to her. She'd never mentioned it to him. Their indifferent coexistence had become somehow more informed, somehow less indifferent.

He'd tried to be angry that night in bed after he'd dumped Mr. Whiskers, after her "confession," but he'd succeeded for only a few minutes. He'd been unable to keep his eyes open. Deb's easy, innocent breathing beside him had been hypnotic, contagious. The anger, hurt, and resentment had refused to stay with him, flying away even as he'd tried to grasp them tighter, like all the helium balloons from all Janey's small, clumsy fists over the years. In the end, he'd been almost paralyzed by an odd tranquility, a peculiar lightness. As though along with Mr. Whiskers, he'd dumped a heavy burden.

Next morning he'd picked up the pieces of the dollhouse, stowing them at the back of the worktable where he knew they'd remain for a while. If not forever. He was not a craftsman: He was a hunter. And that would have to do.

Deb's father, Al, was at the bar. They joined him, Deb sitting between the two men. The Gilhousens were at a large, round table at the edge of the dance floor with two other couples, playing darts, drinking pitchers of beer, having a wonderful time. Dave wondered if they might notice him, if that might ring a bell; but if they did, the bell remained unringed. He wondered who was watching Billy. He wondered if Janey had somehow survived, had been brought back to him, if he could ever have let her out of his sight again. He watched Gilhousens laughing, drinking, taking Billy for granted, as though his life was their right, was something that was owed them.

One lucky little boy. One lucky family. It had not been his fate to enjoy such luck, that much he understood. He'd been fated instead to bring that luck to someone else. Almost as if he were on a different plane. The odd tranquility returned, settling upon him at the bar, as he observed, as though from above, the mortals upon whom he had bestowed such good fortune, watching how wisely they spent it.

Deb was less forgiving. She kept glaring at the Gilhousens, muttering aspersions beneath her breath. Al nodded, slouched over the bar with

his hollow cheeks. Then he leaned forward, looking past Deb to Dave, bobbing his head in a nod that was as close to scowl-free as he would ever get. "You done good," he said. Dave nodded back, said nothing, ignoring the goosebumps spreading over his back.

Going home, Deb reached across the front seat of the pickup, putting her hand on his thigh. She rubbed it in little circles. "I think I might have a fever."

It had been a long time. He took her hand, moved it further up his leg. Stopped it from moving. "I better take your temperature."

"I know just where you can put your thermometer. I got a good place."

Holding hands they walked up the steps of the porch, Dave still on his higher plane, looking down. There, on the window sill nearest the door, on an even higher, more tranquil plane, sat Mr. Whiskers, watching his every move.