

## The Stink

I'm not sure how these things go so I'll just write down as much as I can in the time I have and leave it to you to sort out what you need, what you don't. The train will be here in about an hour and a half. Then I'll be gone. That's not a hell of a lot time to get all this down properly, all the ins and outs, I know, but that's what we have.

For the record, my name is Troy Jupiter and I make my living as a realtor here in town. The Borough of Netcong, New Jersey. You know that already. You also know that I'm generally considered the second best Real Estate Agent in town. I've always talked a straight game and pride myself on that fact. A house is no good, I tell my clients outright. Many's a time I could've put one over on some greenhorn and made a quick buck, unloaded a lemon. Like that time that young couple from Whippany wanted to buy the house that Hank (Waterson, local General Contactor) built on the filled-in river bed. I took them by the arm, led them across the street so we could see the big picture and told them, "See that sag in the middle of the roof's spine? It increases half an inch a year as the river bed settles. The doors are all sticking now just a little. Another couple of years you'll be living in something looks like it came out of *Alice In Wonderland*." Well, Hank's cut his losses on that one, the crook, and that couple, they called me just last week. They're ready to buy their second home and are looking for a good, honest, sane man to help them along. They thought of me. They don't know about my troubles yet. I was polite though and told them I was on hiatus, considering early retirement. Something like that. That's no so, of course, but a white lie can be excused now and then, I guess. In the end, I referred them to Donald Grillet. He's generally considered the number one realtor in town. I mention all this to show that I don't hold any ill-will or grudges against anybody, even my competitors, so you can have some sort of account, for the record, of my character. That what happened, what's happening, is just an aberration or sorts and I really didn't mean any harm to anyone. Least that's what I'm thinking now.

I've lived in this town, for almost, geez, fifteen years, close to twenty I guess. For the past three, up on Windsor, number sixteen with my family. That is up until yesterday when my wife, Ro, took my three kids, Sandy, Pete and Joey and left me to go live with her mother down in North Carolina, where "things didn't stink so much." When she said "stink" she meant it in the literal sense of the word. Though I suppose the figurative sense would hold water just the same too.

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The first and only time I saw the bastard was the night before Thanksgiving. Ro and I had old friends over. Friends we hadn't seen in years. The kind of friends that when you look into their faces, you see yourself and you're reminded of how things were once upon a time, how long ago that actually was and how much older you're getting now that you've finally recognized the space that time put between you and what you were. You were once oblivious to your status as indestructible and now, maybe fifteen, twenty years later, you're seriously affected by how the market does on any given day. A tear, I swear to god, came to my eye when I saw them. I didn't even know I missed them. Not that things were terrible. Just the opposite really. Now that I reflect on it, as a matter of fact, everything seemed just about near perfect that night of the dinner with those old friends. Perfect house. Perfect kids. Perfect, beautiful, angelic, wife. Poor Ro.

Perfect life, really. But seeing faces from the past after so long puts a sort of punctuation mark on the whole deal. Turns the page, so to speak. Anyway, we had just finished dinner and Ro and our guests were busy with the after-dinner bustle, carrying plates and silverware with one hand, sipping wine with the other, when I riled up the dog and ushered him toward the back door connected to my office. I flipped on the backyard light and –bam! just like that—I was arrested by the eyes of a demon staring at me from the deck, about five feet away from where I stood stopped in my tracks. The green, sulfurous pinpoints of light glared at me coldly, with a brand of indignation I’ve never known the likes of and will surely never forget. There was no hint of fear in this thing, there was no backing away. No thought of retreat. As I took a hold of Derby and tugged him back into the house, I was aware that this was no ordinary skunk. The truth is, I didn’t know that it even was a skunk. I thought it was something else entirely. Maybe a new species. See, this skunk, my skunk, was big, maybe twenty pounds and was white with a black stripe down its back. The complete opposite of our preconceived notions of the species’ appearance. And more malicious. That much I’m sure of. Definitely more malicious than your everyday skunk.

After I learned from Jonny, our visiting friend, that white skunks with black stripes were not unheard of and that that was probably what it was, we traded stories about how this dog or that dog once got sprayed and had to be doused with tomato juice. We decided I was lucky to have spotted it before I got too close to it and set off the trigger. Laugh. Laugh. Laugh. But I was uneasy the rest of the night. A sort of butterflies-low-in-your-gut anxiety took hold. Uncertainty in the laughter, as that song goes, and I certainly didn’t feel lucky. I felt as if I’d been blighted.

Later, in bed, Ro and I talked about old times, how great things were once upon a time, and how sometimes it's tough to see how good things are right in the moment you're in them. Like now, she said. I said yeah. If I close the deal on the Jefferson property, I'd take the number one spot on the whiteboard that month. Beat out old Don “the fillet” Grillet. We could get that Escalade we needed. That's not everything she said. And I said I know but I liked to buy her things and make her happy. She said she already was. She has a way of tilting her head slightly to the left when she says things like that. She has smoky eyes. Like the thin smoke of incense. Untainted love and pain. I said that I think it’s good to stop and look around once in awhile like we did that night. That we only get a clear picture of ourselves about five, maybe ten years after that fact and that's how we picture ourselves in our mind. Five or ten years younger. That’s why recent photos of ourselves always look strange. It takes us time to compromise with our own image. Something like that. She said that sounded deep. We made love, quiet, not to wake the kids, but sweet. Real sweet.

The skunk blasted us a few hours later, in the dead of night, like a sneak attack, and roused Ro and me out of a sound sleep. The smell. The smell was so pungent I could taste it. I taste it still. As I sit here and write this I can taste the fucker. That bitter, sulfuric, rotten eggs, stink of the suburban skunk. I could almost see the terrible odor as it filled the room, degree by nauseating degree, a yellow poisonous haze that engulfs you even as you just begin your recoil. No way to get out of the way. Like running but never getting anywhere in a nightmare. A nightmare. A goddamn nightmare.

Sitting up beside me, Ro doubled over. “Oh god,” were the only words she could think to say. “Oh Jesus,” was my only answer.

I guess you could say it was a kind religious experience that first night. Like we both caught a glimpse of God in all his unholy fury with that stench suffocating us. Like he was punishing us for a lifetime of sin. That's how it felt. Like a punishment.

It was immediately obvious that this skunk wasn't merely outside tyrannizing the neighborhood, his scent coming in through the cracks in the windows. The son of a bitch was in my home! Something clicked in me. Something caveman.

Raising my shirt over my nose in some absurd pantomime of a bandit from the Wild West, I clambered down the stairs cautiously, but quickly, ready for battle. Derby, usually quick to join my side no matter what god-forsaken hour of the night, had his head lodged in the pillows of the couch. He was whimpering pathetically. It angered me. What this thing reduced my dog to.

Guided by the intensity of the stench, I found the epicenter of the blast in my office. A quick scan of the room revealed nothing, but there was a squealing sound coming from the floor. I'd never heard anything quite like it. In pitch and timber it was unmistakably animal, but in its passion, eerily human. It was a cry for mercy; it was an unconscious emission of blind agony.

Ro shrieked, afraid of the unknown, expecting that some horror-movie type episode would surely come next. "What is it!? What is it!?" Panicking.

"I don't know. I think—but a skunk wouldn't—"

"Shh"

We heard a frantic scratching below our feet, and then a chilling silence. We looked expectantly at one another. Instinct guided my hand to the window and I flicked up the shade. We saw the back end of a ground hog scurrying for dear life down the road, never to return. He was sneezing furiously all over the asphalt.

All at once, my own folly rained down on me.

"It's my fault. I should have made sure it was dead."

"The skunk?"

"Groundhog. Goddamn groundhog. I should have killed the fucker."

We had just remodeled the office that fall. It was a Florida room when we bought the house, built on the backyard deck. The room was essentially a wood frame shell, about ten feet by twenty, standing about 8 inches from the surface of the ground. The deck extended out from it about six feet in both directions and opened up to be the backyard deck, the platform for many summer barbeque cookouts. We were paying the taxes on the structure anyway so why not make it a livable space? In my line of work, I knew full well the value the conversion would add to our investment and I couldn't resist. Elbow equity we call it in the business. Our plan had always been to patch up the house and flip it in three years anyway. This one was a no-brainer. Stupid if I didn't. The project entailed opening up and insulating the walls, replacing the thin storm windows with energy-efficient vinyl ones and opening the floor to insulate beneath.

With the floor open, the first thing I noticed was a large hole, about twelve inches in diameter, so black that it could have extended straight down to the ninth circle of hell for all I knew. I realized pretty quickly that in actuality it was one of the neighborhood woodchuck's tunnels. Ro asked if it was under the house, in the crawl space. I told her no way. That the crawl space was solid concrete around the perimeter. And it was. Under the deck was just one the groundhog's hangouts. He won't bother anybody down there I said. I dropped a large rock down the hole to urge him stop using the space. But that was it. And it didn't work, obviously. The busy little bastard.

We'd often see him perched on a rock chewing leaves contentedly, fat and furry. One of his eyes looked lazy, but I saw it up close once, again almost stumbling inadvertently into it while

exiting through the backdoor, and I noticed that the skin around the eye was chewed up and scarred. His teeth were crooked. Often I'd fling open the back door and let Derby have at him, getting a kick out the quick chase that ended invariably with the woodchuck squeezing his fat ass through the white picket fence, the dog snorting in protest at the outcome of the events. I'd always thought these little skirmishes to be cheap entertainment, harmless distractions, but now I was paying the price.

"The skunk and the groundhog got into a fight under the office." It sounded, even as the words left my mouth, like the premise for some Loony Tunes episode. I could picture Bugs Bunny standing in between this skunk and woodchuck, egging them on, laughing when the woodchuck got sprayed.

Standing there in the toxic cloud of shame. I could have avoided this, I thought. I brought this problem on for my poor wife, all she wanted was a peaceful life up here.

"Well, what are we gonna do?" The irritation in her voice matching my own.

"Nothing now. What can I do?" Already feeling the weight on me, thinking automatically that "we" meant me, what was *I* going to do about it. Insinuating.

"We can't let the kids sleep here." Her maternal instinct kicking in strong. The first thing she thinks about, the kids. I love her for it. Sometimes it's maddening. How can someone be so unselfish. Takes a minute to remind myself how transcendent this impulse of her's is. How selfish I am.

"They seem to be sleeping just fine." And they were. "Kids must not have a sense of smell." Trying to make light of it. But she was right. Chuckling. We opened all the windows to let it air out, wrapped the kids up in the blankets and hustled them into the car like thieves in the night. We made use of the guest room at my sister's across town.

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Donald Grillet said, "And another thing, you aren't wearing your hairpiece. You know what that does, your clients, one day you take them out to a ranch up in Byram, a full head of hair, a week later you drive them over to a Stanhope Bi-Level bald as an eagle? It's downright creepy."

I lifted my hand to my scalp fearing the worst and finding it. Don was right, of course. The toupee wasn't there. I was pretty sure I applied the adhesive but —shit—I can see the thing still sitting on the dresser. I felt naked. An amputee in a spotlight. The image of what my head must have looked like just then, under the fluorescent light in Don's office, popped into my mind and I had to make a conscious effort to dim it back down into the darkness again. Or perish. Things were happening to me, that's for sure. Forgetting my hair. Jesus.

"What's happened to you, Troy? Last month... damn, last month I thought you were going to beat me for the first time."

"Second."

"All right, but that first time. You know, I was laid up with a herniated disc. That don't count."

I didn't say anything to that. I just wanted this little brow-beating to be over with so I can get on with what I had to do. I had only stopped in to, I don't know, get away from the stink for a few minutes. Think over my next plan of attack. When Don said he needed a word, I knew this was coming. That it was long overdue. I had to just grin and bear it.

"Point is," he continued, "you were within an inch of victory and--"

“Paperwork didn’t come through quick enough. Home insurance. Inspection papers. To make the closing date last month.”

“A good agent makes the papers come through!” His voice cracking a little with the excitement. “And since then-”

“You don’t understand.”

And he didn’t. The last month or so hadn’t gone well at all. We called off Thanksgiving for one. That was a no-brainer. Ro and the kids went to my mother’s. I spent the day in the freezing rain digging trenches around the perimeter of the deck, over a hundred fifty linear feet. A foot and a half deep, the internet said. Bury one end of the chicken wire deep and then staple the other end to the deck. I found out quickly how rocky the soil is up here. Every two shovel-fulls, a ten pound mini-boulder. The whole time I was thinking the son of a bitch could blast me out of my shoes at any time. The mud all over my clothes. My hands scratched to hell from the frayed ends of the chicken wire. Thanksgiving. The mud and the blood and the stink.

And it all went downhill from there. The little bastard didn’t like me banging away all over the deck and started spraying again that night. Not full blasts, but little squirts, like marking his territory. We smelled it coming, watching the tube, Monday Night Football. Ro and I looked at each other. Her eyes closed slowly, an exasperated sigh. I started cursing. I walked over to the office and paced, knowing the miscreant was maybe ten inches away, just under me. So close. So far. I stamped up and down on the floor stupidly. The dog barking at me. The smell coming a little stronger now.

I remembered reading Ken Kesey. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. That evil nurse feeding them the pills but the giant Indian saw it as fog coming into the room. That’s how this felt. Like the skunk was bleeding just enough fog into my house to make me jumpy, fry my synapses, attack my nervous system. Difference was, this fog seeped into your clothes, and couch and rugs and didn’t leave for months. Reminding you over and over again. Every time you breathed.

It wasn’t enough to force us out of the house, just enough to cause minor nausea, and neither of us were so keen on moving in with my sister. So we just started to live in it. Opening all the windows at night. Space heaters in the room. Shut doors. It’s a cold fall too, as you know. We ate our breakfast with our coats on. Seeing our breath in the cold air.

We went out that weekend and bought every deodorant and incense known to man. Spray cans, plug-in spritzers, carpet deodorizer, pet odor eliminator, incense sticks, and aroma therapy liquids you pour into little pseudo-Asian vases and burn with a tiny candles placed underneath. We had car air fresheners hanging over doorways like mistletoe. We must’ve spent close to three hundred bucks on all those perfume products.

I also bought a 52” Plasma, I don’t know why. We needed it. Made me feel better.

I went outside the next day and surveyed my chicken-wire perimeter. I found three mice lodged in the mesh, hanging there like some kind of crazy ornaments, frozen like flies in amber in the midst of their exodus. They had expressions of terror on their tiny dead faces. Maybe it was an expression of hope, though, the promise of freedom right before their eyes, their asses trapped in the wire. It’s hard to tell on faces that small. I squeezed them out, like toothpaste out of a tube, and gave them a proper burial because Pete saw me doing something and muttering to myself hunched over next to the deck. Ro peeked out the window as I patted down fresh soil on the three mice.

“Kind of a Rube-Goldberg method of getting rid of pests,” I called over my shoulder.

“Like the Old Woman who swallowed a fly,” she said. I had to think a minute how that one went.

“Look, Dad,” called Pete, “There’s still two openings.”

And he was right. I had missed a small space on the side of the set of deck steps, and where the driveway met the deck there was access to the underside via the hollowed out ground under the concrete. I patched it up.

That was a mistake. We got a full blast that night. The skunk was trapped in. Not out.

When the kids were asleep, we whispered to each other like soldiers in enemy territory. Plotting, trying to figure out what to do. We started arguing, before long, hints of blame being cast, just below the surface of the words. Bitter defensiveness masking feelings of guilt. Then we realized that this little woodland creature was making us argue with each other, starting to pull our unified front apart. That’s his strategy I said. The absurdity of it.

“Can you believe this. Maybe one day we’ll laugh about it,” And I tried to laugh, twisting my face into the appropriate shape. It must have looked grotesque. Ro began to cry. Anger always gives way to despair too quickly with her. It broke my heart. Infuriated me. I promised to call the exterminator first thing in the morning. Get rid of the fucker.

I spent the entire next day talking about skunks with whoever would listen. I was told that with no way to get out, the skunk was nervous and started spraying. The Pros said that all they’d do is set traps and come and check them. That I could do that myself. That was nice of them, I thought. Most of the time people you call for special services like this, exterminating, plumbing, squeeze you for everything you got. Rule number one, they never, ever, tell you how to do it yourself. Then I thought, maybe even exterminators can’t deal with skunks. That made me nervous.

When I bought the traps at the hardware store, I was sure the usual crew, whose job it is to stand around the counter and bullshit about sweating pipes, brake jobs, and the differences between the spackle in the blue bucket and the kind in the green, all smelled me enter the store. Approaching the counter, they all got kind of quiet. Then nonchalantly took a few steps backward, increasing the area of the circle. The guy behind the counter, usually inquiring about the weather, kept his eyes down. Didn’t even notice what it was I was buying. I had made a conscious effort to pick clothes right out of the dryer too. Washed myself good, just out of the shower. The possibility that I was getting immune to the smell, that I couldn’t even smell it anymore, was maybe the most terrifying prospect of the whole deal.

I opened up a hole in the chicken wire eight inches in diameter and set the trap up right outside it so the little bastard had no other choice but to trigger it when he ventured out for food.

“I don’t care what they say about being humane,” I declared at dinner that night, the kids wearing mittens. “When I catch him I’m taking the trap down to the lake and tying a rock to it.”

Except that didn’t happen. We got blasted again. I threw a chair and shattered the mirror in the living room. The kids got up and stood behind Ro, scared looks in their faces. “Seven years bad luck,” Joey said.

I had no idea that a closing date for one of my clients had come and gone that day. I wasn’t checking my messages anymore.

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“And since then,” Don went on, picking up one of the gold pens he was awarded for outstanding service, “Since then you’ve been unreliable.”

Don was starting to get on my nerves. He had cold clammy hands and his teeth were too white. Unnaturally white. Glowing almost. I couldn’t understand why homebuyers trusted him to

sell them houses. “And another thing,” he said. Don says that a lot. It’s goddamn annoying. “And another thing, I never understood this last name of your’s. Jupiter. It sounds like a planet.”

“It is a planet.”

“Then what the hell is it doing on your business card. You’re a Real Estate Agent for Christ’s sake. Have some pride. I know it isn’t your natural Christian name. No one has—”

“My natural *Christian* name is Geppetto,” I said. “That’s more ridiculous.”

“Why?”

“Pinocchio’s father.”

“Jupiter is a comic book hero. It sounds like a—”

“I thought it had a ring to it. On the lawn signs. Easy to remember.”

“Well, I don’t like it.”

“I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately, Don.”

The exterminators told me that skunks were smart. They sensed the danger and having the traps set up right outside the opening was as good as having no opening at all. You have to move them away. Two or three of them placed about eight to ten feet away. Camouflage them.

“Camouflage?”

“Yeah, obscure them with plastic trash bags and leaves so the metal doesn’t show.”

“OK.”

“And try not to handle the traps so much, get your smell all over the trap. They’ll sense it and shy away.”

“Smell me?” I asked.

“Ironic, ain’t it?”

I didn’t find the humor in that but I set the traps like he said and stuffed them with peanut butter, tuna and cat food. Stuff skunks are supposed to like. I powdered flour on the ground outside the hole to know when the little bastard left. Envisioning these evil little footprints walking out. This way I could close it up when he left.

“Whacha doin’?” my neighbor asked. He’s an obese man with food stains on his shirt. Always wears shorts and tube socks, I don’t know why. He’s a gym teacher maybe. I hate him but had to give him the run down of the situation because of some unwritten suburban rule.

“I thought I smelled something,” he said, chuckling at my story when I was through, “Good Luck.” And then went back to his house to play video games. It occurred to me then that the stench was much less noticeable outside. That the smell was isolated to the inside of the house. My house. This guy chuckling at it, going in to report it to his wife, who’d be too spaced out on mood drugs and painkillers to see any reality in the situation. Just another episode of the news maybe. A detached bit of gossip bleeding through the gauze wrapped around the suburban wound.

According to my research—this skunk thing becoming a full time job – skunks don’t like light or noise. I bought a dozen of the brightest flashlights I could find and slid them under the deck as far as I could reach. I also bought two radio alarm clocks, loud ones, and tuned them into conservative talk radio stations. The most annoying sounds I could think of. I slid them under too.

I told Ro that would annoy the piss out of the bastard and force him out of there. Unless he’s a right-wing skunk, of course. She laughed. At night, when everything was quiet, you could hear Sean Hannity yapping about something, all angry at liberals, under my floorboards.

I ordered five pounds of powdered fox urine from the internet.

It rained ice and slush for two weeks straight and there was no way for me to accurately assess the comings and goings of the skunk according to the flour-on-the-ground method.

We didn't catch him in the traps either. My mother-in-law once had a raccoon living in her garage. She set a trap and caught a skunk, not a raccoon. She had the town "relocate" it. Me. Me, I got a skunk living practically in my house and what I catch are five squirrels, six cats and a handful of chipmunks. No skunk. Every time I went outside and saw the trap shut, I'd almost swoon with elation. Every time though, bitter disappointment. My skunk wasn't smart. He was a goddamn evil genius.

There was a bright side, I suppose. There were no bombs. For three solid weeks no attack came. I went around sniffing every night asking Ro incessantly. "Is it spraying? Is it spraying?" She'd tell me no, it's just the remnants. Residual stink. I'd say "Do you think it's gone?" over and over. She stopped answering me after awhile. Like, "how do I know if it's gone?" But I was obsessed with it. I tried to think about the possibilities. The thing was there or it wasn't. If I closed up the hole, it would either be barred out, or it would start spraying. I didn't know what to do. I tried to think like a skunk.

I kept waking up in the middle of the night thinking we'd been attacked. I'd jump out of bed and hurry downstairs. Walk around naked in the dark, sniffing in corners. I'd bend down and sniff the rugs. The sensation of the dream, the smell, was still in my nose. A phantom smell I was trying to pinpoint.

After two weeks with no attack from below, I gathered up everyone's clothes and threw them in the garbage cans. We went on shopping spree for a new wardrobe. Ro said that the wash got the smell out but I didn't care. We put the down payment on the Escalade too. Took on the monthly payments.

I closed the hole that night. The new car smell. No bomb. I thanked god. Breathed a sigh of relief. We all did.

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Don said he understood that I was under a lot of pressure and that's why he was suggesting a mandatory leave of absence.

"That doesn't sound like a suggestion."

"It's not. It's mandatory. The Swanson couple called today and told me about your new car. Said it reeked in there and didn't want to go out with you anymore."

"It's a new car. I've got payments."

"That's not the point," he said, coming around the desk, standing over me now.

"Don," I said, "if I had an account like Hideaway Hills, I'd be kicking your ass and you know it." Hideaway Hills is the townhouse complex that just went up lakeside. For some reason Don was getting all the action over there. I suspected nepotism, favoritism. Some sort of *ism*.

He bent down, very deliberate, slow, his meaty paw on my shoulder now. He looked at me with mock-pity, triumph flickering in those red-rimmed eyes. "Troy, let me put it to you like this. You stink. Your wife stinks. Your kids—I'm sorry to say this, even my kids say it, they're in class together—your kids stink. Everything about you stinks."

"Fuck you, Don."

"I can't let you go showing houses to clients with that, that *aura* around you." Waving his hand around me in a circular motion. "Take some time off to get your head together, no pun intended." Glancing up at my missing hair.

“Don- I’m sorry. Listen.”

“No. You listen.” He walked away to stare out the window, his back to me. “‘Representatives must upkeep personal hygiene.’ As clear as day in the company handbook. Now I want you to go. I can’t stand the smell of you anymore, sitting there like that. Get out.” He hooked his thumb toward the door.

Nancy, the office receptionist, had her eyes in her lap when I walked through the pit. The walk of shame. The others, the new, hungry agents all took a predatory pleasure in watching me go. I felt the glares on my skin like needles.

On the front seat of the Escalade were two things. One was a drawing Sandy did and left on my desk. It was a picture of me, her Dad, frowning. A skunk was at my feet. She drew in little wavy lines emanating from its tail to show that it stunk. The skunk was angry. She learned somewhere to make two slanting eyebrows over its eyes to show anger, as if the skunk was angry at me for something I did. Maybe who I was. She wrote WE LOVE YOU DAD across the top of the sheet. I found that drawing next to the letter Ro left saying she was going down to North Carolina.

The other item on the seat was the antique sword I bought at one of the shops in Hackettstown. I didn’t give a shit if the lady in that dusty shop smelled me or not. I saw the sword in the window and I just bought it on impulse. I stood sentinel all night on the lawn chair, awake with the cold, alive, waiting for the skunk, thinking I’d splay him if he showed his ugly little face. I kept picturing red meat with maggots spilling out through the slice I’d make in the white fur on his belly. I wouldn’t care if he sprayed me when I attacked. I’d bask in it. Sending him back to hell.

I took the sword, I don’t know what came over me, and tried to poke holes in the tires of Don’s Mercedes SUV. I mimicked lunges from old Zorro movies. The sword was way too dull though. I think it was from the Civil War, around that time, so I just started whacking the body of the truck with the blade, putting little nicks in the shiny white finish. I think maybe I put a small dent in the front passenger side fender. Nothing that couldn’t be buffed out though.

The shot-gun blast scared the hell out of me. Don was standing there in the door. He’s a hunter, Don. Or says he is. Says he goes and shoots bucks out past the Poconos someplace. He has a head of one of them hanging in his office. He shot into the air the first time, I think, but the shotgun was trained on me now.

“You’re gonna shoot me!?” I screamed in a high pitched voice that didn’t sound like my own. “I can’t believe you think you’re going to shoot me!” How silly that sounded. Shooting someone. Then thinking how silly I was. A forty-two year old skin head with a rusty Civil War sword in my hand, whipping the hell out of a Mercedes.

Don didn’t answer. He watched me like a hawk as I got back into the Escalade, dejected, and drove away.

On my way back home, I pulled into the Quick-Check, bought all the gasoline containers they had, about a dozen or so, and started filling them up one by one. Derek, the attendant down there, isn’t the brightest bulb on the tree, but he’s friendly enough and I usually pass the filling up time with him talking about the Giants or the weather or both. As the liquid filled the containers, he was talking to me about how he was thinking of getting a job at the Wal-Mart pushing carts. He was saying that it was better than pumping gas for some reason. I didn’t catch it though. I was busy thinking about the events of the last week. What led me here. Smiling.

The skunk broke our unspoken treaty in the middle of the day, Christmas Eve day, while we were getting everything ready to go down to my brother’s. I didn’t move a muscle. Just sat there

on the couch as the skunk wafted over me. Infiltrated my lungs. Penetrated every pore of skin. I felt a shadow somewhere in the room creeping across the wall, covering me. Must be getting late, I thought. I thought of that Edgar Allen Poe story where that guy gets free of the pendulum just in time, only to find that the walls are closing in, pushing him into a bottomless pit, over the edge into the abyss.

I started repeating all the useless information I found on the internet about skunks.

“They have three assholes, skunks. Or rather three pipes going into the one asshole.”

“Babe, you’re scaring the kids.”

“One is where the shit comes out, the other two are the ones they spray you with. Skunks. They always aim for the eyes, you know that? To blind you, vindictive bastards, so they can get away. Someone said skunks are proof that God has a sense of humor. It’s funny, isn’t it? This is so fucking funny, I’m laughing my goddamned head off.”

“We’ll have to open up the floor,” she said, trying to calm me with reason. “So we can get at it and have it removed by professionals.”

“Eleven species. Omnivorous. Some people remove their stink bags, aha, I mean their anal scent glands,” it all really did seem funny to me for a minute there and I really did start to laugh. “And keep them for pets. People say they’re cute.-- And what? Destroy the tile floor I just put down? Ten dollars a tile, I’m going to rip it up because of a fucking skunk!? Not on your life. I’m smarter than this skunk. Hahahahaha. I’m going to win this one, babe. We’re not ripping up that goddamned floor. --And if I met anyone that kept them for a pet, I swear to you that I’d punch them in the face until their nose was jabbing at their brain. And if I met the skunk! Oh—no, no, *when* I meet that little bastard I’m going to remove more than his fucking stink bag, that’s for sure. I’ll torture it. Torture! Heheheh. They’re nocturnal, you know that? They don’t hibernate but their activity slows down in the late fall. Late fall! That little cocksucker is anything but inactive, wouldn’t you say. Ha, hah, hah. And listen to this. They don’t burrow but have been known to use tunnels dug by--”

I stood up. Something came over me. A Eureka.

“Babe, what is it?”

“Poison.” I turned and addressed my family as if I were a head coach addressing a football squad in a locker room on game day. I said, “It’s time to stop fucking around.”

I shoved enough rat poison under that deck to kill a hippopotamus. I wrapped it in peanut butter, tuna fish, wet cat food. Some of it I left free. I slid twenty pans of anti-freeze for the little bastard to wash it down with. When that was all set, I inserted a funnel into the garden house and sent six gallons of ammonia down there, as close to where I remember the woodchuck hole being as I could. Skunks hate ammonia the internet said.

That night, feeling weightless, I bought Ro a five thousand dollar diamond necklace. Gave it to her the next morning. My kids opened their presents from Santa in the stink. I didn’t care about anything. The skunk was soon to be dead. The skunk was dying, probably right as we sat there that Christmas morning, freezing.

\*

I was wrong. It blasted us two days later while I was buying granite countertops for the kitchen remodel I decided I was going to do. When I came home to the fresh, sharp ,rotten-egg, garlic, sulfur stink, I found the notes from Sandy and Ro.

\*

After I set fire to the empty townhouses of Hideaway Hills as best I could, I drove home, and poured the rest of the gasoline over everything. House, car, deck, yard. And watched it go up with the rising sun. It was beautiful. The flames were hot and orange against the blue dawn, showing now through the bare trees. I smelled something toxic, like burning plastic, and welcomed it.

My obese neighbor stood next to me on the street and we stood there watching my burning house as if we were watching a fireworks display. Beholding its beauty.

“Must’ve delivered this to the wrong house,” he said. He put the five pound container of powdered fox urine in my hand.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Electrical?” he asked.

I said, “There is one god that is lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over this ship.”

He asked me what movie that was from.

I walked away, headed for the train station, before the fire trucks even got there.

\*

It’s New Year’s Day morning. There’s smoke in the sky and I can hear my train approaching. I hope that this helps you with the insurance companies. To sort all the paperwork out, I don’t know. I think I’m sorry for what I did. Maybe it’s too early to tell. But I felt I had to come clean and get it off my chest, so here you have it.

I feel lighter now, like after taking ski boots off and getting into your sneakers. You can move around freely. You want to jump around.

I’ll go down to North Carolina and see if Ro will come with me to wherever it is I’m going to go. I won’t say for obvious reasons. Also, I don’t know. I’ll change my name again probably. Maybe a different planet. Maybe a different fairy-tale character.

*Joseph Christiana*

*New Jersey, January 2009*