

## Ground Level

I rolled to a stop at an intersection. It was raining, and my windshield wipers didn't work. Trees surrounded me, and for some reason my window was half rolled down. My arm was wet. There were cars behind me, but they could wait a second while I rolled up my window.

Just before I reached to do so, I noticed in my peripheral vision a large orange object on the right side of the car. I turned, and was surprised to see giant Bengal tiger emerging from the trees. It stood tall enough so its massive head was just as high as my windows. It shook the water off its head, looked right at me, and circled around the front of the car.

The vehicle behind me honked, once, and then immediately stopped.

It occurred to me then that I had heard something on the radio about a Bengal tiger escaping the zoo. But I was thirty minutes away from the city, could a tiger walk that far?

The tiger pushed his massive jaws through my half open window. I felt warm breath against the side of my face.

I wanted to scream, but couldn't. Suddenly I held my camera phone with my right hand as I reached out to push him away with the other. The camera took a moment to focus, and I hoped I had enough time before he decided to eat me. As the camera clicked, I pressed against the hairy, warm flesh around its mouth, pleading it to leave me alone. It opened its jaws and--

--what was that? A dream. No tiger, I'm in my bedroom. There was a noise. A crash from the hallway, maybe the living room or den. I can't tell and maybe it was just in my dream?

I'm lying on my stomach, arms wrapped around a pillow, my head facing toward the window and away from the open bedroom door. I stay this way longer than I want, startled and cautious, not wanting to ruffle the sheets or reposition for fear of drowning out the noise if it happens again.

My eyes are open, and after a few seconds I realize I'm being ridiculous. I push up with my arms and turn to face the door, then come back down to rest my face on the pillow. From this angle I can see down the hallway and out the window at the end. The streetlight right outside shines bright into my eyes and I remember why I never sleep facing this direction.

The noise again.

So I'm not imagining. It was a crash. Something fell. Something in the living room and down the hall, adjacent to the window with the streetlight.

My mind begins to race. Something would have to cause something to fall. Someone bumped into something.

I hear footsteps.

There is someone else in the apartment with me.

I move my eyes to look at the digital clock. 2:30. I look back down the hallway. I am groggy, unsure. Maybe something fell and I am overreacting? Maybe the suction cup soap holder in the shower lost it's suction? This happens.

So I reason I'll just stay like this, eyes wide, and watch the streetlight. If something walks in front of the streetlight, I'll know for sure.

But what then? My phone is in the bathroom across the hall. Can't get it. I left it there so when it rings at six I have to get out of bed to turn it off. Motivate me to get up.

Do I pretend to be asleep?

What do burglars do? Is there a code of ethics? Do they take what they want and leave if nobody objects? As far as they know I'm still sleeping, so no harm done, right?

Or do they kill for the thrill? What if he comes into the bedroom and sees that I'm sleeping, and puts a knife in my back before I can react just for the fun? He gets a TV, the only price was my life.

*Man killed in home, TV stolen.*

I picture my killer laughing at the headline. I am "man," no name. I am the someone you hear about at work in passing and say "that's a shame" and continue on with your day completely uninterested in even knowing my name. My life is reduced to a fleeting thought.

Oh, shit. Did I just blink or did something cross the light?

More noises, coming from that direction. Scratches, not footsteps.

*What?*

I curse myself for not wearing clothes to bed. Now I'm not just "man," I'm "naked man," and you get to laugh at me, too.

This is stupid. What would someone else do? I have to do something. What can I use to my advantage?

Surprise, right? Element of surprise. I have that. Element of naked surprise, but perhaps I can wait until they get close and spring up with a choke hold.

What if there is more than one?

Fuck this.

I get up and flip the light on. My entire body breaks out in goose bumps. I feel my muscles involuntarily contract and for the first time in my life know true fear. My face contorts and I feel my lips turn into a frown, and my eyes bulge more than is comfortable, but I know I have to do this.

I storm into the hallway and hit the light.

Surprise, motherfuckers.

"What are you doing in here?" I demand with a voice stronger than I feel on my way to the living room, and I'm proud of myself.

No response. I turn the corner, not giving myself time to imagine what might be there, and hit the lights. I look around, and nothing is there.

I look behind the couch. I glance at the sliding door to make sure it's locked. I glance toward the front door to see if it's propped open. I storm into the kitchen, turn on the bright lights. Refrigerator, stove, sink. It is empty.

I walk back down the hall, turn on the bathroom lights. Sink, toilet. The shower curtain is pulled tight and I quickly run my hand along it.

Spinning around, I enter the den. Lights on. Chair, desk. Closet full of clothes but nobody there.

I sigh.

I hear the scratching again from the living room. I am more relaxed now, my breathing slowly returning to normal. An animal? Mouse?

Nothing is turned over or crashed on the floor. My DVDs are all on the shelf. Remote control and magazines on the coffee table.

The air conditioner kicks on. I'm reminded of my clammy skin in the humidity. Something scratches in the air intake.

Must be something loose in there. Insulation, duck tape, or something. Who knows what it could be, and I'm not about to find out at 2:30 in the morning. I walk over to the intake and cautiously kick at it. My reasoning is if it's an animal I'd startle it and it would move again and I'd know for sure, but since there's no response I resign myself to a weekend of screwdrivers and hand tools I have no business using but will anyway.

I take a deep breath and turn off the lights in the kitchen and living room. I walk down the hallway and turn off the thermostat. I'd rather be hot and sticky than wake up to crashing noises or make the problem worse before I can look at it.

Soon I am back in bed, on top of the covers. I have checked the locks and it takes me ten minutes before I turn off the lights, even though I am by myself. I wait for the adrenaline to subside.

Later, I roll over and it's 4:00. One eye is crusted and I rub it. I fall back asleep and wake to the sound of buzzing. 6:00. I get up, walk into the bathroom through the morning haze coming in through the window at the end of the hall, and laugh at my reaction hours earlier. Decide I can't wait to tell my coworkers.

I fumble for the phone and turn the alarm off. For a moment I contemplate going back to bed.

I decide I'd better stick to my plan. I stretch, yawn, and scratch.

Flip on the light, and see that the shower curtain is pulled to one side.