BREAK- IN

My name is Ryan, and I live with my wife Terri in Red Bluff, California. We have been married for almost three years now, and hope to have our first baby later next year. We both work for the state power company, Pacific Gas & Electric -- she in the local branch office and I on a utility repair truck.

It was on an early October night that we had our first break-in. For most of eight months of the year, the evening weather in Northern California is comfortable enough to sleep with the windows and doors of the house kept opened, obviously both screened. When the daytime temperatures are hot, this procedure cools the whole house down overnight. When the daytime temperatures are temperate, it airs the house out nicely and makes for ideal cuddling and sleeping.

"Ryan, wake up...," Terri spoke twice as she shook me awake that night. She was always the lightest sleeper of the two of us. "I think someone's in the living room!"

Though still groggy, I put on my eyeglasses and reached under the bed for my Louisville Slugger baseball bat. (I had been told by a retired cop at a party once that the best home defense was not a firearm, but rather a large, barking dog. A sturdy, wooden baseball bat was the next best option. On his advice, I later sold my Marlin .30-30 lever-action 336 rifle, and my nickel-plated .357 magnum pistol. Other than for target practice, and because I didn't hunt, I figured I'd never use them.) Then I went slowly into the living room, with Terri right behind me, and turned on the light.

We were both surprised to see a large raccoon in a panic, trying to exit the house. He had clawed a hole in one of our older back window screens and had come in. Now he was frantically trying to find the hole again and escape. I approached him with the bat, not poised to hit, but rather to guide him towards the screen opening, motioning with the Slugger outstretched. He banged into the wall a few last times, then finally found the hole he made and took off.

Terri got immediately busy afterwards, closing up all the windows and doors throughout the house. "That was freaky! I thought at first that it had a be a burglar or someone," she admitted. The following morning over breakfast, we guessed that the raccoon had smelled our open 30 lb. bag of dry cat food, its odor wafting from the area near our kitchen and back screen door. We had recently begun feeding four feral gray cats in our back yard twice a day. Their left ears had been notched, which indicated that they had been spayed or neutered, and had been given their vaccinations before being released back into the community. But we both knew that raccoons had a good memory, and would somehow always return to a place that offered food. "Let's call the county Animal Control department, and see if we can borrow a trap," I suggested. "I hear that raccoons love marshmallows, so we can bait the trap with that, and after we catch him, I'll take him far away and release him in the wild. He won't get back."

But the Animal Control people wanted $10 a day for a trap rental (with a hefty deposit), plus a $50 fee for the eventual removal of the varmint. Terri agreed to our simply going on Amazon Prime instead and ordering a trap of our own. It was a large HavaHart cage for $50, and it arrived in two days. That night, after putting it in a far corner of our one-third acre property by some thick bushes, we baited it with a handful of marshmallows and waited until dawn to see if we got lucky.

The first night, nothing.

Second night, nothing.

Third night, something!

But it was a grayish-white opossum -- with a pink snout and a long, bald, pinkish tail -- rather than the raccoon we expected. Who knew that opossums also liked marshmallows? I put an old bed sheet over the cage to calm the critter, then put him in the trunk of my car and drove him to a wooded nature preserve by a creek about five miles away. As soon as I opened the trap door, he gladly skedaddled. Back at home that evening after work, I washed the cage out with a hose, then set it up again with its usual bait, and Terri and I waited.

Nothing for four nights. Then we heard a crashing and thrashing out in the darkness by the trap. Something was caught! We went back to sleep until sunrise, then I went out and saw a huge, 12-15 pound raccoon, his black bandit mask across his eyes and his great furry-striped tail curled around his body. He barely fit in the cage! He was not happy in his metal cell. I covered the trap with the bed sheet as I had done before, and likewise took him out to the same area that I released the opossum. But was it the same raccoon who had earlier broken into our living room? Neither Terri or I could be sure.

That night, however, we relaxed. Although we cleaned and re-baited the trap, nothing was captured for ten days. So we risked opening all of our screened windows and doors again at night to resume our routine of fresh air. We had already bought a new back window screen, and a large plastic tub with an air-tight lid to store our supply of dry cat kibble. It appeared that any unwanted wild critters were not around anymore.

But October 24 was a nightmare that Terri and I are still recovering from. For on that dramatic night, we suffered another, much more dangerous, break-in.

"Ryan, honey, wake up...I think someone is in the house...I thought I heard noises near the front door," Terri whispered to me as I stirred myself awake. The lighted alarm clock dial registered 2:13. I grabbed my bat again from under the bed. Irritated, I thought: Damn, here we go again...

As I left the bedroom, with Terri behind me, I noticed what appeared to be a flashlight beam strangely sweeping around our living room. I quickly reached out around the hallway corner and flipped on the room light switch.

Who was more startled -- us or the intruder? Probably an equal shock. Before us stood an older teenaged white male, probably around age 19, with pimpled, pale skin, a few wisps of curly facial hair, and a pair of faux diamond ear studs. He was wearing a soiled white t-shirt under a fraying black hoodie, with black jeans and dirty dark athletic shoes. He seemed very agitated, as if high on amphetamines or some other drugs, his open mouth revealing crooked and stained teeth. In his right hand was a lethal, military-style commando knife with a wicked 6" blade. From the corner of my eye, without turning my head and clutching my Slugger tightly, I saw that the youth had sliced a flap of screen large enough for his hand to enter and carefully unlock our front screen door from the inside. He turned the flashlight he held in his left hand off and placed it in a hip pocket.

"I want all of your cash and any laptop computers in the house," the invader demanded, his voice unsteady but trying to sound commanding and in control. "Try to give me any shit and I'll carve you and the woman up like a turkey," he added, waving his knife. "And I mean it."

"Hey man, look, I don't want any trouble," I countered, thinking as fast as I could. "The best thing for you to do right now is to go out the door and leave. The only damage done so far is to our screen door. I can cover that. I won't need to call the cops if you just go. Entering a house with a weapon is a felony, and you'll be up shit's creek if you keep going ahead with your plan. Be smart, and go," I added," before anyone gets hurt." I motioned with my bat.

"F\*ck you, man! I'm calling the shots here! Let's have the cash and those laptops...now!" the punk ordered, even more threatening and agitated.

"O.K., O.K., let's all calm down. How about I give you $100 to leave right now? That way, you get some of what you want, the easy way. How about it? My wallet is on the dresser in our bedroom, no problem" I offered. "No one gets hurt. And I'll still skip calling the police. (Here, I lied.) What do you say? Take some free money and run."

"A lousy 'C' note? You must think I'm an idiot. That won't even buy me two fixes, man! I need a lot more...and you're going to give it to me!" he said menacingly, taking a measured step towards me.

Terri interrupted the dangerous male stare-down. "Look, Ryan, let's just do what the man says. I'll get your wallet and my purse from the bedroom. Then you can get our laptops from the other room. Give him what he wants so he'll leave us alone. Getting cut up or killed for money and replaceable stuff is just foolish." Before I could object, she slipped out from behind me and rounded the hall corner that led to our bedroom.

The intruder snorted, "There now, you see...you've got one smart lady there. So let's get this over and done with." He stroked the shiny blade of his knife gently across his left palm, giving me a sick grin with his bad teeth.

Terri was gone for about fifteen seconds, but it seemed a lot longer. I spent that tense moment studying the bloodshot dark eyes of the robber. I figured he would probably sell the laptops -- and any other stolen merchandise he had -- cheaply on the black market, then use the cash to buy drugs. What a sad, pathetic, wasted life. I also estimated his reflexes and overall physical strength. If we fought, I felt I would likely win, but could get badly bloodied in the struggle. And I dare not leave my wife unprotected if I was injured and he was not.

But when Terri reappeared, she was clutching not my wallet and her purse, but rather a 1911 Colt .45 pistol! She pulled the slide back, chambering the first of its seven rounds. Terri next crouched in the classic shooter's stance and said angrily, "Alright, asshole, you want to do it the hard way, eh? Well, make your move, tough guy, and we'll see who wins! Ryan, move a little to your right. Then I've got a better shot at him, dead-center."

As to which man was more surprised at that moment, I can't say. But the stunned intruder dropped his knife and ran out the door. He didn't get far, however, because he wound up colliding with his criminal partner, who was seconds from also walking in our front door, wondering why his buddy was taking so long while he himself waited in their getaway car, with the motor running, in front of our house. Both men went down in a tangled heap on our cement walkway. Terri instantly flipped on the front porch light, so I was able to step out and whack both intruders with my baseball bat as they scrambled to escape -- the initial man hard across the shoulder, probably breaking his collarbone, and his accomplice on the side of his knee as he tried to rise and run. Both men were seriously immobilized with very painful injuries. "Stay down until the police arrive," I barked. "Terri, call 911 while I guard these two." Speaking to the criminal pair, I added," If either of you moves a muscle, I swear to God I'll use your head for f\*cking batting practice!"

The Red Bluff police arrived with flashing lights and drawn weapons within a few minutes. They cuffed the two injured intruders, then dragged and loaded them in the back of the cruiser after taking down our detailed statements as to what exactly had happened. They also turned off the engine of the getaway car, and said they would return and impound it tomorrow.

"We have been looking for these guys for the last few weeks," one of the officers remarked. "They have been using the same robbery pattern. Once they get what they want, they take off on I-5 and head south to Stockton -- you know, 'Crimetown.' It's like the Wild West down there. Lots of gang shootings, robberies, you name it. But I'm glad we finally got 'em, thanks to you two. We'll take them to the ER first and patch 'em up, then run 'em in and lock 'em up. No charges obviously against you good people. You folks have a peaceful evening now, and rest easy," the other patrolman commented. "You did the right thing. And I would get a more secure front screen door if I were you, if you still intend on leaving it open at night."

Terri and I were so wired with adrenaline that we couldn't just go back to sleep, so we stayed up and talked over mugs of calming herbal tea. We also mindlessly ate half of an entire bear claw coffee cake.

"Honey, you really saved the day for us," I began. "That sure was some quick-thinking. I didn't even know you had a gun."

"Well, sweetheart, after you sold your pistol and rifle, I was afraid of being all alone and vulnerable on nights when you were out on emergency PG&E jobs. So I asked my Dad what to do. He gave me his great-grandpa's 1911 Colt which was used in World War One. We cleaned it up and practiced at a shooting range until I felt comfortable with it. I kept it hidden in my sewing box in our bedroom because I knew you would never bother looking in there," Terri revealed. "I'm sorry I kept it a secret from you." I simply smiled and squeezed her hand across the table and told her to forget about it.

"But before you congratulate me too much, I have to confess something else, darling. In my nervousness, I forgot to load the pistol clip with any bullets," she slowly admitted, embarrassed, lowering her eyes. That said, Terri got up and retrieved the Colt from the living room where she had set it down after the police had arrived. "See?" She ejected the empty clip and showed it to me. "No ammo. Daddy taught me to never load a gun until you were ready to use it. So I always kept the bullets separate, for safety," she explained. "Now you know."

After that revelation, what could we do but laugh together? The whole experience that night was so crazy. We hugged and kissed and finally went back to bed just before the sun rose brightly on another day...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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