

SALVATORE DIFALCO

The Skunk

INSIDE, THE WIFE BERATES ME from the bathroom about something I failed to do several days ago. The matter, small then, has become microscopic to me so I bring no heat to the battle. And so it happens. Helen wins in a rout. I was wrong, I was wrong, I am evil, I am Beelzebub. But not content with mere victory she now wants to rip my heart out and eat it, she wants to eviscerate me and fill my body cavity with hot stones, she wants to jab her toothbrush in my eye, and I'm convinced she'd do it if she could get away with it. Then again, there's no telling what I would do given impunity. This is how things stand right now. I raise my hands in surrender, tell her I need air. The bathroom door slams shut.

Outside it smells like a tire fire. I stand in the driveway with my hands on my hips and the high August sun scorching my head. As I stagger to the back a blue jay buzzes by my head and I eye it to the bough of the oak tree where it harries a cardinal, of all things. Feathers fly. An orange tabby under the tree watches the tussle with sinister absorption. And not to be outdone, the squirrels square off, black versus grey, screeching and tearing at each other's eyes. The world is a battlefield, make no mistake.

I glance next door. The neighbour, a stocky man with salt-and-pepper hair and a tightly trimmed moustache, stands on his deck taking in the action. He and his wife and two boys moved in a few months ago and even though we've bandied nods I don't know his name. What does that say about me? About him? About the way things are right now? I find it hard to be objective these days.

Poking his head over the privacy fence, the neighbour declares that a skunk has taken refuge under his shed. This explains everything. No wonder Larry Holmes, our lab-husky mix, wouldn't venture out. Last summer in the park down the street he ran into his first skunk. It wasn't pleasant. Wildlife abounds in this neck of the woods: coyote, fox, raccoon, and deer. Just the other day a doe and fawn clattered up the driveway, giving me a

good fright. No bears have been sighted, but it wouldn't surprise me. A bear in the driveway would get the ticker clapping, yes it would. The neighbour has more to say.

"Last guy who owned the house didn't concrete the space under the shed."

"He didn't?"

"He did not. What kind of man doesn't concrete the space under his shed?"



When I tell Helen about the skunk, first she rebukes me for not telling her sooner, then she trumpets fears that Larry Holmes is at risk.

"He's not stupid enough to mess with another skunk, honey."

She shoots me a hard look. "Just keep your eyes open, Ralph. Especially at night. Skunks are nocturnal."

I don't know much about skunks, except for the obvious. I mean what's there to know? It wouldn't be hard to find out more about them, but the idea of it bores me. Lately everything bores me. I've stopped watching television and movies. I can't read anything, not even magazines. I don't sleep well at night.



Helen hates her job at the hotel. She claims the other girls gang up on her, whisper behind her back, sabotage her work. Just the other day she heard them laughing it up in the washroom. They never laugh when she's around, this is the thing. Every workplace has its problems, I tell her. Just stand up for yourself, do a good job and no one can touch you. You're full of hot air, she says. Then she starts crying. She meets my efforts to comfort her with a shoulder shift. I understand. She begrudges my position—I'm a youth counsellor, well paid with full benefits. But it's heartbreaking work and it takes its toll on you. I'm a shadow of my former self. I've lost my sense of humour, my spark. But this is not about me. Despite having many marketable talents and a supple intellect, Helen has resigned herself. Get another job, I encourage her, but she can't bring herself to do it, to search, to go through the rigmarole of the interviews and so on. I've stopped listening to her complaints about work, though I let her vent. I do that with the kids I counsel—let them vent, without getting too involved.



One morning I'm taking out the garbage. Viola, the elderly neighbour from across the street, blue-haired with hips like a chesterfield, waves to me and shouts something I don't catch. I gesture.

"There's a skunk loose, Ralph."

"Yes, there is. He's under my next-door neighbour's shed."

"It's a female," she cackles.

She finds this amusing. She has no children, no grandchildren, no pets. I often get the feeling she making sport of me. Helen says I remind Viola of her ex-husband, something disconcerting on many levels.

"They're hard to kill," she says.

"It's not funny, Viola."

"But it is, Ralph. It is."

Back inside I describe the above encounter to Helen. She's getting ready for work, darting back and forth between the bedroom and the bathroom, whipping clothes and shoes about, spilling powders and creams, convulsing with hysterical energy. She abruptly stops what she's doing in the hall and glares at me, her chest heaving. Then she whips a hairbrush down the hall, bouncing it off the pantry door.

"Viola's batty, now out of my way, I'm late."

"But I resent people mocking me."

"Tell it to the marines."



I see the neighbour poking around his tomatoes with a long wooden pole. They look ill, the tomatoes, pale, mealy. I wouldn't eat one if you paid me. The sky is a pretty blue today, angelic clouds frame the jet streaks chalking it. And birds flit from branch to branch, finches spiked among the sparrows and the grackles, but are they finches? And where is yesterday's blue jay? So nervy, so bold. A chirp like a bark. A dog of a bird, dogging the others. I know little about nature, only what I've seen on the television and most of that I have forgotten. The neighbour detects my presence and approaches the fence, breathing heavily. I can see him through the slats, in a canary yellow shirt, the armpits soaked.

"Thought I had the bugger."

"Don't you fear being sprayed?"

"That's why I've got the pole."

I believe a skunk has more range than that but I'm not in the mood to debate it.



Helen and I sip nightcaps on the front porch. Helen makes a beautiful martini. I suck the pimento out of the second olive, take a tasty gulp. This is fine. Larry Holmes snores at our feet. A candle Helen lit flickers softly on the little table between us; Orion glitters above us. Except for the clicking of bats a hushed tranquility envelopes the street. Helen sighs.

"It's lovely out."

"It is," I say, with feeling.

"What's that?" She points to the dimly lit corner.

For a moment I see nothing; then through a pale shaft of streetlight, a white slash comes into view.

"Oh my God," Helen says.

I lean forward in my chair. The skunk. She has stopped at a mailbox. I wonder for what reason exactly. She probes with fascination, fearless, omnipotent, an enigma. But this won't last. She will cross the street and come right for us, I conjecture, because things often happen that way. So when she abruptly crosses the street and comes right for us I am not surprised.

Larry Holmes jumps up but freezes in mid-frame like a bronze relief. I wish I had a camera handy. Helen looks to me, eyes soft, trembling hands bunched to her chin. But I don't know what to do. Screaming seems wrong; running wronger still. The shuffling skunk bears down on us, primeval, cartoonish, horrific, but at the last moment makes a sudden turn and continues to the neighbour's driveway where she dives into the shadows.

Later, in bed, when I rest my hand on Helen's hip, she pretends to sleep, even feigning a delicate snore. The hip feels cold, all bone. I listen to her snoring. I know the difference. I keep my hand on her hip for a long time. It doesn't warm up. At one point she pretends to dream, mutters something, and shifts away from me on the bed, clinging to the airy precipice of her side.



Next morning in the kitchen Helen smashes an orange majolica rooster into smithereens. Shards fly across the floor tiles. Larry Holmes cowers under the table. I let her vent. It is nothing I have done, or so I believe.

"What's the matter now?"

"I'm not happy."

"Tell me something I don't know." I think she's going to take a swing at me, but she goes quiet all of a sudden, stills her body. Then I think she's going to cry but she doesn't; she walks out of the kitchen and locks herself in the bathroom.



At twilight Larry Holmes steps out. After his evening piss he likes to do a perimeter check around the backyard. It's all bullshit if you ask me but it makes him feel powerful or something I suppose, master of his domain. I expect him to come scratching at the side door any second. Then I hear the yelp. My knees almost buckle. I know what that yelp means. I know. It's one of those moments again. Any second I expect Helen to come running out of the bathroom, and she does, though plastered with a luminous green face cream. We stare at each other, then bolt for the door.



It takes five or six hosings and the application of special shampoo to thoroughly clean the dog's fur, and even then his face exudes the smell, poor bastard. You've never seen a more miserable animal. Helen vetoed the use of tomato juice, citing several studies that questioned its efficacy in dealing with skunk excretions. Who would argue with that? What a scene. The skunk got Larry Holmes square in the chops, temporarily blinding him and causing him to vomit and convulse in a seizure of revulsion and wretchedness. The dog can be dramatic yes, but an objective evaluation would give him good cause for the show on this occasion. His pain is real; I feel for him. The only one more miserable than Larry Holmes is Helen.

"We should have been more vigilant."

"The dog needs his space."

"He's shattered."

"He'll get over it."

Helen dips her head and bursts into tears. Jesus Christ, she's quite upset. "Honey," I say, gently touching her shoulder, expecting another rebuff. But rather than retreating she lets me embrace her and then wraps her arms around my neck, burying her face in my chest, shaking with sobs, clinging to me long after the weeping stops.



The neighbour told me that bright lights keep skunks away so I retrieve the stepladder, intent on replacing the burnt-out bulb above the side door. I'm the first to admit I'm useless as a handyman. I have no feel for it. The slightest task makes me cringe with anxiety. I look at a hammer or a wrench and I want to run for the hills. Perhaps if I took the time to

learn a few basics I would save myself a lot of trouble but I can't see that happening in this lifetime. We are what we are, after all.

I'm not up on the ladder for more than a minute when I detect movement at the end of the driveway. Nothing. Maybe just a cat, or the wind, though there's no wind. I continue with my task. The fucking thing is jammed or something, the bulb, and I'm afraid to break the fragile glass by twisting it too forcefully. That happened to me when we first moved into the house. While unscrewing a dead light bulb above the stove it broke in my hand. I sustained a wound on my palm and when I tried to get out the rest of the light bulb I received a nasty shock. Helen laughed her head off though I failed to see the humour in it. My arm ached for days. She chided me for whining. Maybe I milked it some, taking the week off work and loafing around the house. I unscrew the present dead light bulb without issue and am about to replace it when I see a white stripe moving toward me like a banner. I hear myself scream. That I could make such a sound gives me pause. Larry Holmes starts freaking out inside. I freeze like a sloth on the ladder as the skunk moves in. I hear Helen calling me. Not now, I say in my head, not now. I'm afraid to look. I hold my breath and steel myself. I look. The skunk is not alone. Three little ones surround her, chirping, tails raised.



"Skunks are nearly blind," the neighbour explains, working on a wedge of rich red watermelon. "But they're fearless, for obvious reasons. They shoot the offensive pungence from anal glands. They say even skunks can't stand their own smell. Cats keep their distance and only dogs that haven't been sprayed bother them."

"I saw her last night with little ones."

"They're called kits." He spits some pits and bears down again.

"I don't scare easy but I almost shit my pants."

The neighbour grins. "No doubt. I plugged up the space under my shed. She must be staying someplace else." He wipes his lips with the back of his hand and tosses the watermelon rind among his sick tomatoes.



Helen's been in the bathroom for over an hour when I decide to knock. She doesn't answer at first. I try the doorknob: locked.

"Helen?"

“Yeah, what is it?”

“I have to go.”

The door opens. I start. Helen has dyed her hair jet black. She asks me what I think about it and I tell her it looks very Goth, is that what she wants? She brushes by me, pumping her elbows. I follow her into the kitchen. She looks strange with the black hair. She stands at the sink and stares out the window.

“Helen, what’s going on?”

“I hate you, Ralph.”

“Well, I’m glad we got that out of the way.”

“No, I mean I really hate you.”

“Yes.”

“You’re not listening, Ralph. You’re not listening to me.”

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When I get home from a bike ride one afternoon Larry Holmes greets me howling at the door and does a tap-dance, so I know he has knocked down the baby gate that kept him confined to the kitchen. But Helen left the bedroom door open and Larry Holmes took a nap on the bed and perhaps in his guilty excitement upon my arriving peed in it. I strip down the mattress immediately and launder the soiled bedding. Stain-repellent saved the mattress, and it’s nice to know that some things work in life, and are worth the extra money. I banish Larry Holmes to the backyard for the rest of the day where he sulks under the oak tree. When Helen comes home she doesn’t believe he peed on the bed. She demands proof.

“I laundered everything.”

“You’re a terrible person.”

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An argument erupts next door, shattering a peaceful, violet evening. Larry Holmes stirs in his sleep. Helen looks up from her *Vanity Fair*, sniffs, and returns to her reading, despite the poor light, but a quiver in her upper lip puts me on alert. Something has gone off in her head, has irked her, something she read, maybe the drama next door, maybe something in the back of her mind, but it will fall on me like stones, it will bury me alive, I can feel it coming. Meanwhile the fight next door continues until I hear what sounds like a clap or a slap; then a screen door quietly opens and shuts. My neighbour remains on his deck, attacking a wire coat-hanger

with needle-nosed pliers. Helen seethes in the dying light. Larry Holmes returns to sleep. Stomach cramps force me inside.



A few days later an ambulance pulls up to Viola's house. Two beefy paramedics push a gurney up the driveway. Moments later they roll a body out of the house. Even though they've covered her up, an arm dangles loose and I can tell by the porky fingers and the chintzy rings they are hers. Poor Viola. When I break the news to Helen she buries her face in her hands and sobs uncontrollably. She liked the old woman. They shared something precious, something very human. Tears pour through her fingers and she rocks to and fro, inconsolable. I don't know what to say or do to comfort her. When I venture too close she makes a hissing sound. That's a new thing, the hissing.



Next morning, under cloudy skies, the neighbour descends the porch steps swinging a galvanized lunch pail and wearing a crimson cap. Spotting Larry Holmes he slows down though he sees the leash, Larry Holmes can do this to people, but then I notice the man's black eye and his slumping shoulders and I reckon that he needs comfort, reassurance.

"Hey neighbour," I say in my most natural voice.

He stares at me, pained, tense, infernal, and looks as if he is about to say something when abruptly and without warning he bursts into tears. It's amazing. I don't know how to treat it. Empathy is my forte but I reckon mere words will not assuage him. I am not beyond strong measures when the situation calls for them and so I do not hesitate to stretch out my arm and with my hand grip his neck, massaging him through his pain, though he snaps out of it quickly enough and hurries off down the street, glancing over his shoulder once or twice.



But the following morning my neighbour greets me from his deck with cries of jubilation. What could it be? I wonder. Has he knocked up the wife again? Has he won the lottery? And yes, it's a beautiful day, the sky so blue it makes me want to scream. Everything is fantastic. Blue jays flock with cardinals. Black squirrels marry grey. Rose of Sharon blooms

gaily in my garden and its saucy pinks merit praise. I feel light as a balloon, helium-filled, colourful. Not a cloud on my horizon, save for the wife in bed with a rubber hot-water bottle, tending her back spasms. But what, there is more? Larry Holmes circles around the yard sniffing the earth, his tail like a pole. What's going on here, eh? What's afoot?

The happy neighbour says, "The skunk is dead."

"The skunk is dead?"

"My youngest pinged her in the skull with a slingshot ball bearing."

"You're kidding me."

"I'm not kidding you. That boy has talent."

"It was the mamma skunk?"

"It was the mamma skunk, that's right."



I don't know how I feel about it. On the one hand I'm gripped by a weird nostalgia for the events that have just passed, though few of them were pleasant. I admit I miss the skunk, and wonder what will become of the little ones. Will they stink up some other neighbourhood? On the other hand, my sentiment for the skunks falls short of true sadness. It was only a matter of time before one of them nailed me. Helen packed her bags in the night. She's going up north for a while to visit her mother and to think about things. I've got things to think about myself, but this seems irrelevant right now.

After Helen loads up the rental car and gets behind the wheel, Larry Holmes starts howling. Brushing a strand of black hair from her face, she smiles, and with a little wave departs. It's the last time we'll ever see her. It happens. I take Larry Holmes for a walk to the park. We spot a coyote by a stand of birches and it puzzles the dog. He doesn't know what to do. He looks at me and whines but I have nothing for him. It is what it is. Later, he dozes at my feet as I sip a gin and tonic on the front porch, sniffing the dark air, wondering where the summer went.

