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The Man in My Basement

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Extract

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1

"Mr. Blakey?" the small white man asked.

I had answered the door expecting big Clarance Mayhew and his cousin Ricky. The three of us had a standing date to play cards on Thursday nights. I was surprised even to hear the doorbell because it was too early for my friends to have made it home from work and neither one of them would have rung the bell anyway. We'd been friends since childhood, since my grandparents owned the house.

"My house is your house," I always said to Clarance and Ricky. I never locked the door because we lived in a secluded colored neighborhood way back from the highway. Everybody knows everybody in my neighborhood, so strangers don't go unnoticed. If somebody stole something from me, I'd have known who it was, what kind of

car he drove, and the numbers on his license plate before he was halfway to Southampton.

"Yes," I said to the small, bald-headed white man in the dark-green suit. "I'm Blakey."

"You have a stand-up basement, Mr. Blakey," the white man told me.

"Say what?"

"Teddy Odett down at Odett Realty said that you had a basement where a man could stand fully erect, one that has electricity and running water."

"This house isn't for sale, mister."

"Bennet. Anniston Bennet. I'm from Greenwich, Connecticut."

"Well this house isn't for sale, Mr. Bennet." I thought the small man would hunch his shoulders, or maybe give me a mean frown if he was used to getting his way. Either way I expected him to leave.

"Oh yes," he said instead. "I know that. Your family has owned this beautiful home for seven generations or more. Mr. Odett told me that. I know it isn't for sale. I'm interested in renting."

"Renting? Like an apartment?"

The man made a face that might have been a smile, or an apology. He let his head loll over his right shoulder and blinked while showing his teeth for a moment.

"Well, not exactly," he said. "I mean yes but not in the conventional way."

His body moved restlessly but his feet stayed planted as

if he were a child who was just learning how to speak to adults.

"Well it's not for rent. It's just an old basement. More spiders down there than dust and there's plenty'a dust."

Mr. Bennet's discomfort increased with my refusal. His small hands clenched as if he were holding on to a railing against high winds.

I didn't care. That white man was a fool. We didn't take in white boarders in my part of the Sag Harbor. I was trying to understand why the real-estate agent Teddy Odett would even refer a white man to my neighborhood.

"I want to rent your basement for a couple of months this summer, Mr. Blakey."

"I just told you —"

"I can make it very much worth your while."

It was his tone that cut me off. Suddenly he was one of those no-nonsense-white-men-in-charge. What he seemed to be saying was "I know something that you had better listen to, fool. Here you think you know what's going on when really you don't have a clue."

I knew that there were white people in the Hamptons that rented their homes for four and five thousand dollars a month over the summer. I owned a home like that. It was three stories high and about two hundred years old. It was in excellent shape too. My father had worked at keeping it *up to code,* as he'd say, for most of his life.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bennet," I said again.

"I'm willing to pay quite a bit for what I want, Mr.

Blakey," the white man said, no longer fidgeting or wagging his head. He was looking straight at me with eyes as blue as you please.

"No," I said, a little more certain.

"Maybe this is a bad time. Will you call me when you've had a chance to think about it? Maybe discuss it with your wife?" He handed me a small white business card as he spoke.

"No wife, no roommate, Mr. Bennet. I live alone and I like it like that."

"Sometimes," he said and then hesitated, "sometimes an opportunity can show up just at the right moment. Sometimes that opportunity might be looking you in the face and you don't quite recognize it."

It was almost as if he were threatening me. But he was mild and unassuming. Maybe it was a sales technique he was working out — that's what I thought at the time.

"Can I call you later to see if you've changed your mind?" he asked.

"You can call all you want," I said, regretting the words as they came out of my mouth. "But I'm not renting anything to anybody."

"Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Blakey." The white man smiled and shook my hand just as if I had said yes to him. "That's my office number in Manhattan on the card. I'd give you my home phone, but I work more than anything else. I hope I'll be hearing from you. If not I will certainly call again."

Before I could say anything else, the little man turned away and walked down to a Volkswagen, the new Bug, parked at the curb. It was a turquoise car that reminded me of an iridescent seven-year beetle.

He made a U-turn and sped away.

Across the street Irene Littleneck was watching from her porch.

"Everything okay, Mr. Blakey?" she called.

"Just a salesman, Miss Littleneck."

"What's he sellin'?"

"I didn't even get to that," I lied. "You don't buy if you're unemployed."

Irene Littleneck, eighty years old and black as tar, flashed her eyes at me. All the way across the road those yellow eyes called me a liar. So I turned my back on them and went into the house.

2

"So you gonna call 'im?" Clarance Mayhew asked me.

"No."

"Why not?" asked Ricky, who was no bigger than one of Clarance's fat legs.

"I don't have an apartment down there, man. I mean there's junk been down there since my mother's mother's mother was a child."

"You could clean it out," Clarance said. His face was chubby and pear shaped. Underneath his chin was a crop of curly hair about an inch thick. Hair wouldn't grow on his cheeks. That's why the tan-colored man always looked about ten years under his actual age. "I mean you ain't got no job so you ain't got no money. You could clean up down there and make yourself somethin' to pay that damn mortgage you took out."

"You want a drink?" I replied.

"Hey." That was Ricky's way of saying yes. He was darker than his cousin but not nearly my color. When my uncle Brent used to see us coming, he'd say, "If it ain't the three shit-colored patches on a tatty brown quilt."

I pulled a bottle of Seagram's from beside the wood chest where we played cards. I took a drink from the bottle and then passed it to Ricky. We never used glasses unless Leonard Butts or Timmy Lee came over to play with us. Clarance, Ricky, and I had drunk from the same bottle since we were babies in the crib.

We were playing blackjack for pennies and I was up $1.25. That meant I had $15.76 left to my name. One more bottle of whiskey and I'd be flat out of money.

"Lemme see some cards," Clarance hissed off the back end of a deep draught of whiskey.

He threw down his three — a heart queen, a deuce, and a trey. Ricky slapped his cards facedown and took the bottle back. I showed two spades, a ten, and an ace.

"Shit," said Clarance. "You got all the luck tonight."

I raked in thirty-seven pennies, thinking about luck and waiting for the bottle.

My aunt Peaches would lend me the money to cover the monthly mortgage payment to the bank. I'd borrowed on the house and Peaches wouldn't let the property slip out of family hands. But if I had to go to her, she'd

give me all kinds of grief about how I should get a job and how disappointed my father would have been to see me falling apart like I was.

I took another draught from the bottle. It felt nice. Good whiskey smoothes out after the third sip. Clears the fuzz from behind your eyeballs and relaxes the spine. I've always liked to drink. So did Clarance and Ricky, who we sometimes called Cat.

"Wilson Ryder needs a man to help on those new houses he's putting up," Ricky said.

"Yeah?" I took another drink and realized that I was hoarding the liquor, so I passed it on to Clarance.

"Yeah," Ricky said. "He'll be down there tomorrow. You should go ask 'im."

"Yeah, maybe I will. Maybe so."

"Maybe?" Clarance was shuffling the cards over and over again, the way he always did when he was getting high. "Maybe? Man, what you thinkin'? Like you some kinda prince don't have to work? They will take this house from you, Charles. You gonna end up like old man Bradford — sleepin' in somebody's garage, eatin' day-old bread, and drinkin' brand X."

"Clara, baby," I said, doing my impersonation of a half-hearted lounge lizard. "What's all this tough love, darlin'?"

Clarance had height to carry all that weight. He stood straight up and grabbed for me, but I pushed my chair back and scrambled out of his reach.

"Goddammit, asshole!" he shouted. "I told you not to call me that!"

"But, baby," I pleaded with my hands clasped as if in prayer. "Clara, you tellin' me I ain't worthy."

I knew calling his name in the feminine for the second time would end the card game. We used to tease Clarance in grade school by calling him Clarabell and then just Clara. He stood there shaking, looking as mean as he could manage.

I laughed. And for a moment there was a chance that we would fight. Not much of a chance, because Clarance knew he couldn't take me. But we were both just high enough to act like fools.

Ricky put the bottle down and picked up his sweater. When he stood, that was the signal for Clarance to turn around and leave. Ricky shook his head at me and followed his cousin out the front door.

They'd left their piles of change on the table where we played.

Clarance and I had had these fights for more than twenty-five years. I could still get to him. I regretted it every time. But all Clarance had to do was be himself and he made me mad. He'd always done better than I had. He held a good job as the daytime dispatcher for a colored cab company. He was married, but he still had more girlfriends than I did. He read the newspaper every day and was always referring to events in the world to prove a

point when we were discussing politics or current affairs. Even though I had made it through three years of college, Clarance always seemed to know more.

For a while there I had a subscription to the *New York Times* just so I could compete. But I never actually read the paper. Sometimes I'd try to do the crossword puzzle, but that just made me feel stupid. Finally, after losing my job at the bank, I let the subscription go.

I did some things better than Clarance. I was good at sports. But he wouldn't compete with me there. He said I was better than him but I couldn't get a scholarship or anything. And he was right. Like my uncle Brent was always happy to say, "He could win the race, but he cain't beat the clock."

So I tortured Clarance now and then, angry at him for proving my inadequacies.

There were certain benefits to an early evening. The first thing was that there was more than half the fifth of whisky left over. I loved to drink. Loved it. But I didn't abuse alcohol. I never drank before the sun went down and never drove while under the influence. Every once in a while I'd make Ricky and Clarance sleep over when they got too tipsy on a Thursday night.

You'd think I'd want to spend the evening with my friends. As it was I spent almost every night alone, listening to the radio or reading science fiction. I never got into the

TV habit. I'd watch the news now and then, but that was mainly to keep up with Clarance. Most nights I spent alone, except when I had a girlfriend. But the last girlfriend I had was Laura Wright. That had ended some months before.

It was mostly just me in the big house. The rooms were large, with big bay windows everywhere. When I was alone I'd wander around in my underwear, talking to myself or reading about outer space. Those were the best moments I had. With the evening spread out in front of me, maybe with some music playing and a few shots of bourbon, I had all the time I needed to think.

I couldn't think when I was around people. In company I was always talking, always telling a joke or laughing at one. My uncle Brent used to say that my mouth was my biggest problem. "Boy," he'd say while sitting in the reclining chair in the den, "if you could just learn to be quiet for a minute, you might hear something worthwhile."

My mother said that I was supposed to love Uncle Brent, but he was hard on children. Brent came to live with us after he had what my mother called *a case of nerves.* There wasn't much wrong with him that I could see, but after his attack he came to live in our house. He kept the garden in the spring and summer and sat in the old chair in what used to be my father's library. But my father was dead by then and Uncle Brent called the library his den.

Brent loved to tell me what was wrong with me. I talked too much, I didn't study enough, I didn't respect authority, and I was way too dark for the genteel colored

community of Forest Cove. That was down in South Carolina, where Brent was born. Brent himself was a deep-brown color, with thick lips that were always turned down as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. The only hint he gave of being sick was that it took him a long time to get out of his chair.

So when my mother was out and he'd let loose with one of his insults, I'd say, "Fuck you, old man," and walk slowly away while he struggled to get up and after me. Once outside I'd tear through the backyard and into the family graveyard. From there I'd make it into the ancient stand of sixty-two oaks that my great-great-grandfather Willam P. Dodd planted.

That night in my house, wandering completely naked through the half-dark rooms, I thought about how much fun it was to torture my mean old uncle. When I'd escaped into the dark-green shadows of those gnarly old trees, I'd get the giggles from excitement. Sometimes Brent would stand out on the back porch and yell for me, but he didn't dare to wander off from the house.

He never told my mother about my curses though. I think it was because he was ashamed at not being able to control a child.

The night after the day I met Mr. Anniston Bennet was the first time I'd ever missed Uncle Brent. It had been more than a decade, and I just then marked his passing.