

# The Intruder

by C. P. Boyko

Pullman awoke in the middle of the night, listening. He did not have to turn over to know that his wife was in bed beside him. He could feel the displacement in the mattress, could feel in the air the contribution of a second set of warm lungs. He held his own breath and listened—turning his attention inside out, letting it seep out of his head and into the distant corners of the house. He could see, but no longer hear, the thumping of his heart, which caused his vision to shudder and buckle every half-second. He closed his eyes, waiting, listening.

When the sound came again, it was faint but unmistakable, like a fingerprint on the air. Downstairs, the loose floorboard had creaked.

Claire lay beside him and neither of the girls was heavy enough to make the floorboard creak. He opened his eyes. The sound of his beating heart returned in a deafening flood.

There was someone in the house.

His mind, that resourceful optimist, flashed through a series of harmless images: It was John Wiesel, their nosy next-door neighbour, looking for candles or batteries (but the power was not out). It was his mother-in-law, in distress (but she didn't have a car, and wouldn't she have rung the doorbell?). It was only his brother (but his brother was in Yellowknife). It was an animal of some sort, come in through the doggy door (but he had fastened it shut three years ago, after the dog died). It was nothing at all, it was no one, it was just the sound of the house settling in the middle of the night.

Or it was an intruder.

What should he do? Go down there and confront them? What if they had a knife or a gun? What if there were more than one of them? Even if there was only one, Pullman knew that he wasn't exactly an imposing figure,

he had no self-defense training, he had no weapon. He wished for a moment that he owned a gun. Then, reflexively, he went over the litany of reasons why he did not: A gun was more likely to kill one of your own family members than an intruder; the girls might discover it one day while searching for birthday presents; it might go off in your hands while you were cleaning it; you might (theoretically) get drunk and start waving it at your spouse to punctuate an argument; you might wake in the middle of the night, thinking you'd heard someone inside your house, and carry it downstairs with you for protection and peace of mind, only to end up shooting the neighbour's cat when it came bounding out of the kitchen, or yourself in the foot when the furnace started up.

And even those times, like now, when there was undoubtedly someone in your house, a gun was likely to do you more harm than good. The intruder wouldn't hesitate to fire his own gun when he saw yours, and if he had no gun there was always a chance that he'd wrest yours away from you or that you'd shoot yourself in the scuffle. In any imaginable scenario it was better to be unarmed. The intruder would be less willing to hurt you or your family if you were unable to hurt him. Defenselessness was a powerful defense.

He wished he had a gun. He did not want to go downstairs without a weapon, some weapon. He did not want to go downstairs at all. He did not even want to get out of bed. He was comfortable. The floor would be cold.

He was being foolish. But was it any less foolish to get out of bed and confront who-knew-what downstairs? If his intention was to scare the burglar away (and surely he could have no other intention), he could do that just as well from up here, by shouting down the stairs that he was calling the police. Such an action would not impress Claire, perhaps. But then Claire was hardly susceptible to being impressed by brazen or brainless displays of machismo, either. If she were awake now (he wished she were awake; he wished she had been the one to hear the floorboard creak, not him), he knew that she would not be goading him on. On the contrary, she would insist that he quietly call the police while she quietly collect the children. Perhaps he should wake her now and suggest this plan himself?

But what if she doubted him?

“How do you know there’s someone down there? This house of yours is always making noises. I’m not going to scare the hell out of the girls just because you think you might have heard some old floorboard creaking. Either go check it out like a man or go back to sleep. I have to get up for work in three hours.”

No, there was nothing to be gained by waking her. Whatever had to be done he would do by himself. He peeled away the sheets and slowly extended one leg over the side of the bed.

What had to be done? *Did* anything have to be done? After all, it didn’t matter if the burglar (or burglars) got away with their TV, their stereo, their cutlery. They had insurance. He couldn’t remember what the deductible was but it was surely much less than the potential cost of an altercation with a desperate, probably dangerous, possibly doped-up criminal.

Gently he lowered both feet to the floor. It was freezing, of course. He should never have let Claire talk him into stripping out the old carpet. So what if it was “disgraceful” to cover up good hardwood. It was also disgraceful that in climbing out of bed in the middle of the night to protect his wife and children from an armed and volatile intruder he should have to pad about in bare feet on an ice rink. And he could hardly confront an intruder in the Kermit the Frog slippers she’d given the girls to give him two Christmases ago.

He wished that he had not heard the floorboard creak in the first place. He so easily might have slept through it. He was usually a very sound sleeper. (Like a dead baby stuffed in a hollow log, his brother had once put it.) People slept through robberies all the time.

The thought occurred to him: *I am being robbed.*

He tipped himself over the edge of the mattress and onto his feet. He cast a terrified glance behind him—what if she was wide awake? What if she was coldly watching him work up his nerve?

But she was sound asleep. Of course she was. With her eyelids flutteringly shut, her mouth wetly agape, her slack and unfurrowed face sunk half-way into the pillow, she looked like a glutton blissfully plunging into the first lemon meringue of a pie-eating contest.

He wished he were still asleep. He wished that he too were unconscious. He wished, for a moment, that he were dead.

Now that he was out of bed and on his feet, now that he was irrevocably committed to descending the stairs and confronting whoever he might find in his house, Pullman felt that there was no shame in wishing that it were otherwise. After all, it was not feeble or unmasculine to want to avoid violence. It was not due to frailty or cowardice that he felt no desire to save his belongings, that he would gladly let the burglar run off with whatever they could get their hands on, that he would happily go back to sleep (if he thought that possible) and call the police in the morning, when the sun was up.

He crept across the room to the door and placed his hand on the knob, listening.

“Oh sure, I heard him all right. But I didn’t think it was really worth getting out of bed for. I mean, a VCR, a couple of hi-fi speakers, a couple hundred compact discs, a mountain bike, a food processor, an old camera—these are only things, after all, replaceable, ultimately disposable things. What’s the big deal?”

“Yes,” the officer—or his wife—would say, “but what if he had come upstairs?”

He turned the knob and stepped out onto the landing. There was no sound, no movement. Everything was as it always was. The girls’ door was shut. A balled-up towel lay on the floor outside the bathroom. A parallelogram of moonlight had stretched itself, complacent and catlike, across one wall.

Gently, he closed the bedroom door behind him and slowly began to descend the stairs.

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There was no one in the living room. There was no one in the kitchen. There was no one in the dining room. The door to the basement was locked from this side. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. Could the intruder have come and gone without taking anything? But that was impossible. Either something was missing, or the burglar was still here.

He opened the door to the basement. He found what he wanted on the top step, next to a baseball glove and one of the girls’ shoes. He carried

the bat with him back into the foyer, where he began his diligent, hopeful search for some sign of having been robbed.

He found what seemed at first like conclusive evidence: the front door was unlocked. Instinctively and with relief he locked it.

But then he realized what this really meant. He or Claire must have left it unlocked.

How would he explain to the police in the morning the fact that there was no indication of forced entry? What would the insurance company say when they discovered that he'd left the front door open? How would Claire react when she learned that he'd allowed an intruder to walk right into their home?

He took one of the girls' pullovers from the closet and wrapped it around the butt of the bat. He unlocked the door again and stepped outside.

The quiet street was chalky with moonlight. Leaves glistened blackly beneath the streetlamps. Nothing moved.

Holding his breath, he smashed the glass pane nearest the doorknob with the bat. It hardly made a sound—the wind-chime tinkling of glass, then silence.

He stepped carefully over the shards and back into the house. Swiftly but methodically he again searched the living room, the kitchen, the dining room. He rummaged through all the closets, opened all the cabinets, pulled out all the drawers and emptied them onto the floor. Nothing was missing. Nothing had even been touched.

That meant the intruder was still in the house. They might have heard Pullman coming down the stairs. They might have ducked into the living room while Pullman was in the kitchen, and into the kitchen when he moved into the dining room. Where were they now?

Pullman dashed into the kitchen, the bat held high. Then back to the living room, and back again through the kitchen to the dining room. There was no one, and no place for anyone to hide.

With a sudden tremor of terror, he realized that the intruder might easily have crept up the stairs while he was in the foyer, wasting his time with the door. That had been as much as ten minutes ago.

He nearly screamed when, on his way to the staircase, the loose floorboard creaked beneath his weight.

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Pullman opened the girls' door.

"Thank God," he whispered.

Ananda was awake. She said nothing and made no movement, just lay there peering up at him out of one moist eye.

He pressed a finger to his lips anyway. Then he rested the bat against one shoulder, crossed the room in three silent strides, and flung open the closet door with his free hand. There was no one there.

He crouched down next to his daughter's bed. She was sitting up now, wide awake. Her sister murmured and tossed once but continued to sleep.

Pullman placed a reassuring but monitory hand on Ananda's knee and whispered, "Somebody is in our house. They came in and then they came upstairs and now they're hiding in Mom and Dad's room. Dad's going to protect you, though. Dad's going to protect you and Mom and your sister from the intruder. You just stay here and look after Maya, okay? Don't either of you leave this room, understand? Not even if you have to pee. And whatever happens, don't go into Mom and Dad's room. Just sit tight. Soon it will be morning and everything will be back to normal. We'll make crepes for breakfast. Okay?"

He patted her knee, then got to his feet. At the door he looked back at the terrified girl and whispered, "Crepes and whip cream. But only if you and Maya are good girls. Only if you both stay put. Because if I catch either of you out there ..."

He shook the baseball bat, then slipped out of the room.

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The intruder was here, in his bedroom.

They were hiding. They had heard Pullman coming and had hidden.

They must have panicked. Pullman could see exactly where the intruder was hiding as soon as he entered the room. The intruder, however, could not see him.

He stepped forward, the bat clutched tightly in both hands.  
Claire, thankfully, was still asleep.

Silently he approached the bed. His thudding heart caused the entire room, the entire house, the entire neighbourhood to shake.

With one quivering arm he raised his weapon above his head. Then he reached out, tossed aside the bedsheets, and with a scream brought the bat down with all his strength onto the intruder's startled face.