

David Woodward
'pew-pew'

Inside the house

It was during the pandemic of the twenties in the twenty-first century when our house was swarmed. We were supposed to be in lockdown mode. But we had smuggled in a friend through the backdoor. He parked his car down the street so as not to attract any attention. A hefty fine and shame were the consequences of being found out. It was our son's third birthday and we wanted to celebrate with at least one other person. We had grown tired of ourselves. Craving contact with the outside world, we broke one little rule. We were already feeling a little guilty when the unlocked front screen door slammed open and in rushed three intruders waving guns. My first reaction was that this was a raid. I didn't altogether trust my neighbours. Could they have called the cops? Undercover agents? Big brother was everywhere. Paranoia crept up quietly to the surface. It fed our shame.

They rounded us up like cattle. 'Move it,' one said, jabbing his gun into my kidneys, 'next to the wall.' I remember my son giggling. He stuck out his index finger and cranked it back as though he were pulling an invisible trigger. 'Pew-pew,' he cried out before saying, 'put your hands in the air.' To this day, he always fires on us when we put up our hands. I tried to explain the surrender concept to him, but he insists on shooting us when we are at our most vulnerable.

The masked intruders took little notice of him, though I noticed a small grin on one of their faces. But it wasn't his lips that gave him away. The mask hid them. I could see his mouth curling upward around his eyes. It made him look kind, human. They kept their focus on the adults. Mostly me.

'What are you doing here?' asked one of them, swooping up some cake icing with his middle finger. He seemed to be addressing me.

'What do you mean?' I asked, my back up against the dirty, white wall.

'Pew-pew-pew, hands-up, put your hands-up. Put them where I can see them.'

I recall thinking, that's a new one. I'd never heard him say that before.

Intruder Number One grinned again. I can still see how the skin around his eyes crinkled like sea fans whenever he grinned. It gave me hope. Though at this point, I was mostly in shock. Perhaps this was all part of the strange time we were living in. Everything that we had experienced up to that point had felt rather dreamlike. The vagrant streets, the empty parks, the blank expressions on the odd person we encountered, the eery silence we felt that could break at any moment. It felt like the emptiness of war. Though how would we know what a war felt like?

Intruder Number Two, the one who was questioning me, undistinguished looking to this day, did not seem amused. He grunted. It reminded me of an animal in heat. A sense of urgency wafted through the air. I breathed it in. Deeply. I imagined my nostrils flaring, compensating for

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the scents in the air, and the strong palpitations of my heart.

He pointed to the cake. Then took another swipe with his middle finger. He pulled his mask down to eat. I still couldn't make out what he looked like.

'Is it someone's birthday, or what?' A foul odor emanated from his person. His lips were caked with icing. There was a spot on the tip of his nose. He coughed. Cake flew out of his mouth.

'Look, mummy, he's got cake on his face.'

My wife pulled him towards her. 'Shh,' she said as quietly as possible.

Intruder Number Two wiped the sides of his mouth with the back of his hand. But the icing on his nose remained. It hung there like an icicle. A gluey icicle on a hot May day. He put his mask back up. It lay just under his nose, and the icing.

My son laughed. 'You're funny.'

I couldn't help but let out a laugh that I was trying to hold in. It came out of my nose.

'Okay, okay, that will be enough of that. You,' he pointed his small gun at my friend, 'you look like a reasonable person. What are you doing here? How do you fit into all of this?'

I remember my friend's bald forehead and how it glistened with sweat. Was he afraid? Or was it just the heat?

'What do you mean?'

'Do you live here...with these people?'

'Why do you ask? Maybe I'm the dad, and this here,' he pulled my wife in close to him, 'is my wife.'

Intruder Number Two grunted. 'I don't think so. They told me the dad looks more like him,' and he pointed the puny pistol in my direction.

'They,' I asked.

'I-I-I've said too much,' he grumbled. 'Forget I said that.'

Intruder Number One grinned. Was he enjoying all of this?

Intruder Number Three, keeping his eyes on my wife the whole time, finally spoke. He pulled his mask down below his chin and leaned in toward Intruder Number Two.

'I told you, I should be the one asking the questions. You always bungle things up.'

Intruder Number Two circled Intruder Number Three, waving his slight handgun in his face. Intruder Three, appearing not to notice, kept his eyes on my wife. He pulled his mask back up.

'Would you like some cake?' he asked.

My wife, aware of his glare, responded, 'Who, me?' She pulled our son in closer to herself.

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'Someone has broken a very important rule here!' Intruder Number Two cried out. 'Someone has to pay for it.' He stopped his pacing around Intruder Number Three and stood inches away from my face. He pulled the mask down below his chin. He wanted to make a point. He wanted it to be clear. He wanted to be fully understood. 'Rules are sacred. They are the foundation of our civilized world.' I could feel his breath on my face. It smelt like I imagined it would.

'Um, boss,' Intruder Number One, the grinner, speaking for the first time, said, 'I don't think we should be getting that close to strangers. We don't know where they've been or who they've been in contact with. This disease is very contagious. Who knows where it is right now.' He gazed around the room as if trying to find its exact location. Satisfied with his search, he looked back at the boss, Intruder Number Two, and grinned.

'Okay, okay, sorry,' he said to no one in particular. 'You're right. One meter away, right?'

'Um, it's two meters now, boss,' piped in Intruder Number Three, his eyes on my wife, his index finger pointing to the cake, touching it. 'You sure you don't want some?'

My wife made a squeamish face. I could read her thoughts. *Why was everyone putting their hands on my cake? Forget the pandemic, it's just plain rude.*

'I think it might be three meters,' Intruder Number One interjected. His mask kept falling below his nose as he spoke, but he quickly pushed it back up, never allowing it to fall all the way to his mouth. I never did get to see his actual grinning lips. I focused on the crinkles around his eyes. 'I read a recent report in, I think in Yahoo news, saying that two was not enough because they have now learned that the virus can lie airborne for up to thirty seconds, so if your distance is only...'

'Okay, okay, enough of that. Forget the pandemic for a minute. We have a job to do.' He looked over at his colleagues. 'Hey, can anyone taste this cake? It doesn't taste like anything to me.' He coughed into the mask, pulled it down to gulp some much-needed air, fidgeted with it a few times, trying to get the right position. Coughed again. Sneezed.

They continued on with their job. Intruder Number Two resumed his inquisition, which led to nowhere in particular. What did he want from us anyway? He never specified this sacred rule that we had broken. Though we all suspected it, they did not seem like the ones that ought to be enforcing it. The whole thing reeked of unprofessionalism. Eventually, after more cake swiping with filthy fingers that were licked clean, they led me away from the others.

'Hands-up, Daddy,' I could hear my son calling out to me, 'pew-pew.' He shot me before I had the chance to put them up.

Outside, there was a van. It was raining. Hard. I could see everyone in the living room watching me as I turned back before getting in. All three faces looked on in disbelief. Or was it indifference? I had trouble detecting any emotion in their looks. Water drained heavily down the glass. They appeared distorted—warped and out of time. It only added to their looks of indifference. Who were they, really? Only my son made a motion

towards me. I could hear his 'pew-pew' in my head. I smiled. I assumed I would never see them again.

Inside the van

From the outside, it looked like any other ordinary van. The type of van I had always been weary of. Some people thought of them with shag carpeting, meant for 'shagging.' But I had always thought of them as cold and industrial-looking within. With only one purpose: kidnapping. Whenever I would see one, I always imagined there was someone in it who was being held against their will in that cold, confined space. They always gave me a profoundly uneasy feeling. When I stepped inside this one, I was not prepared for what I was about to see. There was no shag carpeting, and it was not industrial in the least. And it was not confined. In fact, it was enormous. There were people all over the place. But they were free to roam about. And when I stepped aboard, all eyes fell on me. I remember an orangey glow, as if it were sunset. Or sunrise. And the eyes, only eyes, kept following me wherever I went. The rain pelted the van like gunfire. I felt like it might explode at any moment. Or was I on the brink of blowing up? Perhaps we were all going down together. It felt like a jungle. The humidity was overpowering. I had to take small gulps of air. It was so thick it had troubles going down. When it came out, it stuttered out of my mouth like a faulty engine. But I couldn't stop to rest. The jab of Intruder Number Two's small firearm was at my back. It, he, pushed me forward. The other two also had guns but they had put theirs away. Out of courtesy? But when I turned back, Intruder Number Two was gone. Only the feel of his weapon remained. And the stench. I'll never forget that smell. Something was rotting, but I didn't know what. Was I the only one left with a sense of smell? I recall feeling that I was on a battlefield of sorts. Gunfire was all around me, but I never received a direct hit. Bodies must have been piling up. I would not look down.

The jab in my back led to a narrow hallway. The light was growing more and more faint. Sunset, I assumed. I could hear voices coming at me from all directions. They chattered away chaotically, indistinct, and foreign. I imagined if insects could talk, this is what they would sound like. Then it grew very dark. I was surrounded by blackness. I put my hands out in front and felt my way around. There was nothing but empty space. Nothing was at my back. Nothing prodded me forward. Even the gunfire had died down. It lay somewhere in the distance. A memory. An echo. For some reason I wanted it back. I was not through battling. I had some fight in me left. There was something I needed to see through to the end. The aroma of something rotting pulled me onward. I forgot about the van. I forgot about the house. I came to a spot where my foot could not find the ground. I stopped, whirled about in a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree angle, and fell to the floor. I looked up into the dark to where I had come from. A myriad of eyes of all sorts of colours danced around me like fireflies. Blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes, yellow eyes, red eyes, white eyes, round eyes, elliptical eyes, almond-shaped eyes, little eyes, huge eyes, cat-slitted eyes, snake eyes, diamond eyes, horizontal pupils like that of a goat's eyes, sacred eyes, scared eyes, kind eyes, searching eyes, indifferent eyes, eyes I could not put into words but that I could enter and see the world that lay within. Feeling like a voyeur, an intruder in a land where I did not belong, where I was not welcomed, I closed my eyes. But this only

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increased the image before me. I entered eye after eye, world after world enfolding around me until I felt a push forward and I began the descent into the abyss. The eyes followed me. They were my eyes.

Inside the new world

The smell of rotting flesh was all over me when I landed. The eyes were still with me. They had taken on new forms. Before my eyes they sprouted arms and legs, fingers and toes. They jumped and summersaulted, cartwheeled and spun. We danced together through the marsh until we found a bog. We bounced on it like a trampoline. We became filthy and stunk like skunk cabbage. When I looked down at myself, I saw that I had no form to speak of. Perhaps I had finally received a direct hit. But there was no blood, only a clear liquid mixing with a myriad of green. I saw mosses, orchids, lilies, lavender teas, pickerel weeds, blueberry bushes, sundews, and pitcher plants, all plants associated with bog life, and water; I saw water running through the forms I thought were myself. 'What are you doing here?' the water asked. I didn't know what to say so I said, 'It's my son's birthday.' The water waved from side to side, a gentle, hypnotic wave that put my mind at ease. 'Where did you come from?' I pointed back, but there was nothing to point with, no back to point to. 'We've seen you before,' the water said, 'you've come a long way for a piece of cake.' I stumbled over a cranberry bush, was snapped at by a sundew, and fell back into the moss, back into myself. 'Pew-pew,' I heard in the distance. And the distance approached. And we hugged, long and hard. 'Put your hands up, Daddy—where I can see them. I promise I won't shoot you.'

Outside the house

One, two, three, the intruders left in single file. And the closeness approached. It grew bigger than the distance. 'Pew-pew, I killed it, Daddy.' I recall a light rain, relief from the swelting sun. The fever had broken. I opened my mouth wide, letting the water droplets fall down into my parched throat. Human forms came back into focus. I came back into focus. I inhaled the heavenly scent of the fresh spring air, mushrooms releasing their musky spores into the cool, moist air. I exhaled, full of life. I could taste it all. 'Cake, anyone?'