

A Knock at the Door

by C. T. Martin



It was four o'clock early Monday morning when the deafening sound of a slow, steady knocking came at the door of John Dewey, who lived in Schofield, Alabama. One of his eyes opened during the intermittent silence in between the thunderous knocking, allowing his mind to briefly ponder, *am I dreaming or is that knocking at the door real?* As if the visitor at the door could read the question in his mind, it was answered with an even louder pounding - this time it sounded like the person was using their foot to rapidly kick at the door.

With both eyes wide open and his heart beating fast, John Dewey leapt up from his bed and cautiously made his way through to the front of the house, stumbling along the way into the walls of the hallway leading up to the door. He crouched down low and peeked in between the curtains that covered the glass on the door. They were practical, functional curtains, meant to keep people from peering in, and served no decorative purpose what so ever. No one was there.

John Dewey's mind began to race as he thought: *Who was that? Where have they gone?*

Maybe they're running to the back of the house, trying to get in through a window or the back door or even the roof. He heard what seemed to be footsteps thumping across the roof. He very often heard thumping on his roof. It was only a matter of time before they would no longer be satisfied with walks across his roof and were compelled to cut through the roof and into his attic. Swiftly he ran through his home, first to the back door as he peeked through the blinds, anxious for the yellow rays of the porch light to reveal the would-be intruder. Then on to the living room window just behind the old tan, soft leather couch. He paused, both knees sinking downwards into the leather, until the light sounds of deflation and creaking left, and only silence remained as he strained to listen for anything that might tell him where the mysterious knocker had gone. And just as quickly as he had arrived in the living room, he was up again and flew into each of the three bedrooms. In each room he could hear the noise, the cursed noise, "settling," she called it. He had never believed his wife when she would say that. *Settling?*, he thought to himself. *How does a house settle? Like a person settles on a bed, moving around until comfortably positioned well enough to fall asleep? I don't believe it, it's them alright, peering at me, waiting for their chance to enter.*

About twenty minutes had passed since the rude, obscene noise disturbed his sleep. Tired from the meticulous search of his home, he finally drifted into unconsciousness, laying in bed under the warm blanket, completely still until the first light of day arrived a few hours later. He awakened to the humming of the garbage truck's engine and the loud popping of its brakes. Again, John had forgotten to put out the garbage the night before. He raced to the front, opened the door and looked for the truck to see if he could still catch it before it left. He was too late, empty garbage cans littered the little street and he realized the sounds of the truck he heard were

coming from another block. He hated that, how the truck at times seemed so close but was really further away. That was the second time this month that he had missed the pickup. He stood in the doorway and bent down to retrieve a package that had been left there, probably from a day or two before. *Why didn't the delivery man just ring the doorbell?* A hint of lavender fragrance lingered there in the doorway, and as he was sure that the delivery man was not wearing it (if he was, it was certainly not still there from two days before), he could safely or perhaps unsafely assume that his visitor early that morning had in fact been a woman.

It suddenly occurred to him that if the garbage truck had already gone, so had the seven o'clock hour, and he had very little time to get dressed and make it to work on time at eight. John Dewey was proud of his new job at the bank, even if he hadn't gotten the job entirely on his own. At least he was working. His wife, or soon to be ex-wife, or wife who had vacated the premises, could no longer criticize him for not working. Maribel would have to admit she was proud of him, after all he now had a reliable office job with benefits. Of course, she wasn't around anymore to say that she was proud of him, as if she really would be. John reminded himself that she had used more than one excuse to leave him. In fact, about the only thing they could agree on was that they would never sell their home. They had lived there for twenty-six years and raised their three children in that house. John built the entire home himself and it was still just as beautiful as when they had first moved in, he had always kept up with repairs to the home.

Among other things, Maribel would also complain that John would never stand up for himself. Maybe this new job at the bank would change her mind. He doubted it. It was hard for him to imagine that his obtaining work alone would cause her to think he had changed and make

her come running back into his arms. At that point, he couldn't even be sure that he was cut out for the job, but there was no way he'd ever turn down the chance. It was his next door neighbor, Stanley, a tall blond haired fellow, that had recommended him to the bank manager and suggested to John that he take the position. It was easy work, so long as you could type, which meant for John the work would be hard. But, as Stanley had advised, he took a free typing class at the local library, practicing just enough so that he could honestly mark on the application that he did in fact have typing experience.

Stanley was sort of an odd fellow, on the outside he was like a shiny penny, an assistant bank manager working in a fancy office, but you wouldn't know it by looking at his home. Stanley's house was falling apart and was generally unkempt. Inside his home he kept piles and piles of useless things like years of old newspapers, empty Styrofoam containers from takeout food, and old Metamucil bottles. Stanley's house didn't always look like a junkyard inside, it happened gradually over the years as he accumulated so many useless things and like all pack rats, thought they were valuable. He often spoke with John about needing more space for his collectibles, because his own home had inadequate space for him to store everything.

A short, tired looking man in his late fifties climbed out of an old gray truck and approached the entrance of the building. It was five minutes after eight that Monday morning when he stepped through the front door at the First National Bank of Schofield, Alabama. His new boss, Cooper, was standing there stalwartly, in his neatly pressed black slacks, gray shirt and black tie, his arms folded across his chest.

“You're late!” scolded Cooper.

“Sorry sir,” John Dewey said, in a mild but raspy voice.

“Not a good way to start your first day on the job,” said Cooper, frowning. His thick dark hair fell down across his forehead and covered one of his eyes. John thought it looked like a patch that he imagined a pirate would wear. To him, the glare coming from Cooper’s uncovered eye certainly looked like a pirate, cold and menacing.

“It won’t happen again sir, Mr. Cooper sir,” John stammered sheepishly. He stroked his mustache while he replied in that same low, raspy voice. John Dewey always played with the hairs in his mustache like that when he was nervous.

“And it’s just Cooper, that’s my first name, not my last. Besides, we’re not that formal around here,” he replied.

Cooper led John through the small bank and introduced him to the staff. He began with two bank tellers behind the counter. Both women looked college age and appeared to be very grumpy as they put their cash drawers in place. Cooper managed to only get a brief wave out of them as he led John by.

Next, he took John to a group of desks where several people were already getting settled in to start their morning. Stopping at the first desk, Cooper said, “Matt, I’d like to introduce you to a new employee, John Dewey.”

John reached across the desk almost too eagerly and gave Matt a vigorous hand shake. “Nice to meet you Matt,” he said. An empty mug in his free hand, the man grunted, “Glad to know you.” Then he bolted for the break room where a fresh pot of coffee was brewing.

“This is Nancy, one of our most valuable workers. She understands just about everything there is to know about banking,” Cooper said as they stepped over to the woman’s desk. He smiled and gave a friendly little chuckle as he spoke, trying to loosen up the stiffness that seemed

to always accompany introductions of someone new.

Nancy blushed at the compliment as she firmly grasped John Dewey's hand and greeted him. She was a mature woman, smart looking, and very nicely dressed. She removed her glasses and looked John over thoughtfully. He was wearing tan colored pants and a blue checkered shirt that were so wrinkled they looked as if he had been rolling around on the ground. Her eyes fell down to his old brown loafers before looking back up at John. "You'll really enjoy working here," she said in a serious tone. "And Cooper is a great boss. If there's anything I can help you with, please let me know."

"Thank you Nina," John said, rubbing his mustache.

"It's Nancy," she said politely.

Embarrassed he replied, "Oh, sorry ma'am. Nice to meet you Nancy."

"Well, let's go on to the back and I'll show you where you'll sit and introduce you to Debbie, your mentor," said Cooper, trying to move things along. John quickly turned around to follow him and tripped over his shoe laces, falling to the floor. He rose with a hand from Cooper and continued on the tour.

"What's with the new guy?" Matt whispered to Nancy when he returned from the break room. He placed a cup of coffee on her desk and took a sip from his own.

"He's supposed to be working with Debbie taking loan applications," Nancy whispered. She sampled her cup. "Thanks for remembering to double bag it, not bad. I hear Stanley's the one who brought him in, good friends or neighbors or something like that. A little down on his luck right now too, been out of a job and is going through a divorce. Can you believe he called me *ma'am*?"

Matt's eyes widened as his lips silently mouthed the words, "Your kidding."

In the back, Cooper was just finishing up the introductions. "And of course, you already know my assistant manager, Stanley." He left the two men to themselves and went off into his office.

Stanley wore glasses and a bright smile that matched his blond hair. His teeth were crooked and dingy in appearance. If it weren't for his friendly demeanor, they would make him look very eerie. Like Cooper, he also wore a tie with neatly pressed slacks and a white shirt. Although quite familiar with one another, Stanley shook John's hand heartily and said, "Well, John Dewey, welcome aboard!"

"Stanley, I can't thank you enough for helping me get this job. I sure appreciate you," John said. He was more comfortable now that he was in the presence of a familiar face.

Stanley stood back casually, leaned on one leg and rested his thumbs in his back pockets as he looked out at the bank lobby. He said, "You're gonna love it here John. Debbie, the girl you'll be working with is great, should be very helpful to you. And once you get to know everyone, you'll find it a lot of fun to work here."

"I know I couldn't ask for a better chance than this. I'm gonna do a good job for you. I'll make you proud," John Dewey assured his friend.

"I'm sure you will John, I've got no doubts about that." Stanley then went off about his work and left John to be trained by Debbie.

Debbie was a young woman with long, dark hair. Her eyes were sullen and she didn't smile at all. She had a reputation for being unfriendly, and her co-workers rarely bothered to speak with her as they walked by tending to their various duties. She said nothing, as her eyes focused

intently on her computer screen, the sound of the computer mouse clicking and clicking as she went from one screen to the next. She stacked up a set of papers onto a sheet rack and her fingers flew nimbly over the keyboard as easily as the toes of a tap dancer glide across the floor.

John sat patiently at his desk next to her, waiting for her to begin offering some kind of training for the job. He had learned a little typing, but was completely unfamiliar with the computer system with which he would be taking loan applications, and the thought of that first customer coming in to ask for a loan scared him. It wasn't so much having to talk to someone as it was the computer that made him feel uncomfortable. For John, placing his hands on a keyboard was like having to pull a nickel out of a rottweiler's mouth - it made no sense to him. But, he knew that if he wanted to earn a paycheck he had better get used to the idea, no matter how intimidated he felt.

After some time, Debbie began to show John how to enter a loan application into the computer. He was very slow at grasping the steps involved and Debbie didn't hide her exasperation. Visibly irritated, she got up from her desk and stomped off to the break room to eat her lunch. John was taken aback and felt uneasy, almost feeling guilty for having caused her so much frustration. But as her feet pounded the floor, John was suddenly reminded of the problem he had on his roof at home. The constant thumping noises on the roof. *Why was this woman thumping her feet like that?* His mind imagined that it was this ill-mannered, ill-tempered woman that had been thumping her feet across his roof all along, and now fate had brought him face to face with his tormentor.

But surely Debbie didn't know where he lived, let alone had walked across his roof to disturb and frighten him, she certainly had better things to do than that. Interrupting his thought process,

Stanley approached him and offered to take him to lunch. Although he had brought his own sack lunch, John was glad to have his attention diverted from this debate in his mind, because his imagination was getting away from him. Grateful for the invitation, he grabbed his coat and went to lunch with Stanley.

Late that afternoon, John was satisfied that his first day on the day job had gone fairly well. How much could Cooper expect of him anyway? It was only one day and he hadn't even taken his first customer loan application yet. Stanley told him not to worry, in a few months he would probably be one of the bank's best employees. At five o'clock, the bank closed its doors and John Dewey left for home. On the way, he stopped at the grocery store to pick up a canister of coffee. He had never been a frequent coffee drinker, but working in the bank, smelling that hot coffee all day long made him crave it, and he found himself unable to resist making a pot for himself that night.

As the coffee brewed, John reflected proudly over the day's events and started to open his mail. There were several pieces, mostly flyers he had no interest in and bills filled with red late notices. *Now I can pay all the bills and make the red go away, I'll show them.* His coffee finished brewing and he poured himself a cup of the piping hot beverage. The last piece of mail was a piece of paper folded into thirds, but was not enclosed in an envelope. He unfolded the note and dropped his coffee into his lap as he was horrified to read the following words, written in red lipstick: *"John - You've got exactly what I want. Now that she's gone we can do this. It's time to make the deal. Next time I'll break down your door."*

John Dewey jumped up from his chair, so frightened he started to pace the length of his house, back and forth. He had almost forgotten the incident from this morning, when a stranger

had been at his door, knocking furiously, loud enough to wake up the neighbors. He made no effort to wipe the coffee that had spilled all over his tan colored pants. He often did that, ignored a problem, pretending it wasn't there as if he could just wish it away. But this time, he couldn't ignore the warning in the note. *They can't do this to me, it's wrong to harass people like this. They didn't even mail this. It's against the law to put a note in someone's mailbox without a stamp. Why would someone want to break down my door? I don't have anything they want. I don't even know who wants it.*

Nervously he stumbled through the house, picking up the telephone, then rushing to the front door, and next into his bedroom. Thoughts whirled about through his mind in an amalgam of confusion. He sat on his bed pondering what he should do next. John thought of calling his wife Maribel, but she probably wouldn't want to talk to him, not with how upset she had been when she left. He considered going next door to talk to Stanley, maybe he had seen who it was that left the note in his mailbox and would have an idea of what he should do about the threats. Maybe he heard the pounding on his front door that morning, maybe. Calling the police was yet another idea, but after much consideration he decided they would just brush him off. After all there was no evidence of who had made the threat and no damage had been done. The police would hardly spend time on a case involving a threat like this, surely there were more important ones to tend to, like the threat of murder or other serious bodily harm. If there was only some clue as to who this person was and what they wanted.

There had never been much crime in Schofield, but he didn't want to test things to see if he'd become a headline in the local paper with the first home to be broken into. He went back out, this time to the hardware store, and picked up a couple of heavy duty locks. It didn't take him

but a few minutes to install them, as he was very good with his hands. Before retiring to bed that night John Dewey moved his kitchen table up against the back door, and his recliner up against the front. If the would-be intruder wanted to kick down his door, he was going to make it very hard to do so.

It was four a.m. on Tuesday morning, when the pounding came again, this time it began at his back door. John Dewey sat up like a bolt of lightning, his heart pounding in his chest, twice as fast as the rhythm of the banging on his door. *Now let them try to kick down my door.* He imagined the unwelcome visitor kicking against the door with their foot flat against its surface, but the door wouldn't budge. Against his better judgment he arose from his bed and crept out into the living room to see if he could possibly make out who it was that was disturbing him. An indistinct shadow loomed outside, basking in the light of the back porch light, twisting the door knob, trying in vain to open the door. Then he heard the sound of glass shattering like the loud clanging of a pair of brass cymbals. Broken shards were scattered everywhere, all over his leather couch and on the living room floor.

That was when he decided to ask for help. John Dewey picked up the phone and dialed the police. After putting him on hold for several minutes, the dispatcher for the Schofield Constable's Office finally answered. She promised to send out a squad car, but no one ever showed up. Then John called his wife Maribel.

"What do you want Johnny? I got nothin' to say to you," she said with cold detachment.

John Dewey related to his wife what was happening over the last couple of days, almost everything. "I'll be right over," she replied. He knew she'd come, she must have still cared for him. The separation had been too sudden. If anyone knew what to do, it would be Maribel.

She arrived and surveyed the broken window, shaking her head in disbelief. The two of them went outside to the back porch in search of clues that would lead to who the vandal might be.

Other than the bits of broken glass there were no visible clues at all, except —

“Johnny, do you plan on making the deal?” she asked, her hands resting on her hips and her head cocked to one side.

“Deal, what deal?” he said.

“You know what deal. The deal where they want what you got ‘cause it’s exactly what they want. Are you gonna give in?” she pressed.

“No, I won’t do it,” he said uncertainly.

“You better not Johnny, and don’t pretend like you don’t know who’s doin’ this,” Maribel said with a sharp tongue.

At that moment he realized who it might be. The same aroma he noticed the day before hit his nostrils again. The smell of lavender.

“I’ve got to go,” he said, rushing off to get his coat. “I’m late for work, I think that’s where my answer is at.”

“Yeah, you better get on over there to work and settle this business up,” Maribel called out after him. “I’ll clean this glass up for you, but don’t make me have to go up to the bank and clean up your other mess for you. ‘Cause you know what I’ll do.”

This time John Dewey walked boldly into the front door of the First National Bank of Schofield. It was already fifteen minutes after eight o’clock that morning, but he didn’t care. *Cooper just has to understand what a mess I’ve had this morning.* He noticed an armed guard standing at the counter flirting with one of the bank tellers. He was a tall man, a little

overweight, but wore some kind of a badge and a gun. The gun was what mattered to John. *Since the police won't help me, maybe this guard could come home with me today and help me with my problem.*

John walked over and introduced himself to the man.

"I'm Baskin, officer Baskin, glad to you know ya," he said in a jovial voice. Wasting no time, John began to explain his predicament to the guard.

"Look Jim," the guard began.

"It's John actually," he corrected.

"Sorry John. Look, I'm a private guard for the bank, paid for by the bank. I don't make house calls for burglary, vandalism, murder, or anything like that. You need to call the police, or perhaps a friend with a shotgun."

"You carry a gun, don't you think you could help me out just this once?" John pleaded.

"This thing?" he patted the gun on his hip. "It's just for show. I've never had to use it," he laughed. Quickly he changed the subject like a child whose attention span had run out. "You see that thing over there?" he pointed at the popcorn machine. "Now that boss of yours, Cooper I think his name is, wants me to take care of all these bank customers Friday. Can you imagine that? It's not enough that I'm in charge of parking and security, but he wants me to keep all the Friday customers full of popcorn too. Let me tell you, I predict that on Friday it will be a madhouse in here."

But John Dewey wasn't listening anymore. He began to sweat as he thought of having to work all day with this problem still weighing heavily on his mind. He looked towards the back of the office and saw Debbie, his ill-natured mentor, walk into Cooper's office. Stanley, his only

friend on the job, approached him.

“Good morning John!” he was in a happy mood, mug of coffee in hand. “You dared come back did you?”

He again thought of bringing up the issue with Stanley, but then changed his mind. He just couldn't bring himself to do it without any real proof. After exchanging a little small talk, he marched to his desk and stowed away his sack lunch in the drawer. What was a light aroma of lavender at his back door was now a strong scent of lavender throughout the office. He figured that must have been what made him so uneasy the previous day. The door to Cooper's office was closed and he could hear Debbie's voice raising and lowering frequently. John looked around and noticed that the other employees were in the break room chatting and Stanley had disappeared to the vault or somewhere else. Therefore, he quietly approached Cooper's door and began to eavesdrop.

“What is he doing here? Knowing how I feel about it, I don't understand why you would hire him,” complained the woman.

“John's here because I needed to hire someone reliable after you complained that you didn't have enough help with the loan applications!” Cooper yelled.

“Well I didn't expect you to hire John. You know what it's like around here. I'm not comfortable with this situation,” she replied. “How long is he going to be here?”

“As long as I want him to be. He seems alright to me. Look Debbie. I know some around here already think John is the village idiot. Others complain he's a little older than some of us. And then you have your reasons for not wanting to work with him. Truth is, none of those reasons mean anything to me. If he truly can't do the job, he won't be here long. So deal with

it.”

“Well at least he should get to work on time like the rest of us,” she said in a bitter tone as she spun around on her heels. It wasn’t the first time she had become so disgruntled, but she was a valuable employee and Cooper seemed to always end up letting Debbie have her way.

John could hear Cooper get up to show her the door and so raced back to his desk before they caught him listening in. “Tell John I’d like to see him,” Cooper whispered.

The stomping of Debbie’s footsteps seemed to pound in John’s ears in a similar fashion as they did the day before. The thumping in his ears reached a crescendo so loud that he could almost stand it no longer. Lavender still lingered in the air, causing him further anxiety as he recalled the last three episodes of harassment at his home.

“Cooper wants to see you in his office,” she told John in a loud voice. He wondered why she couldn’t speak as clearly when she was training him. As he walked slowly to the office door, he thought about the smell of lavender and looked back at the young woman. *Maybe it was Debbie that broke the glass this morning. She’s holding a grudge against me. Those footsteps. She’s got to be the one stumping around on my roof.*

Cooper was sitting on top of his desk, waiting for him. He invited John to close the door behind him and then went into the company speech about coming in to work on time. John tried to explain the vandalism problem he had that morning, but Cooper just wouldn’t listen.

“John, when Stanley recommended that I hire you it was with the understanding that you would be a reliable worker and set a good example. How do you think it would look if I let you slide in to work late every morning? Everyone would think that I’ll let you get away with anything just because you’re friends with Stanley. No, I can’t have that. This is your last

warning. The next time you're late, you'll find your desk drawers already cleaned out for you. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir Mr. Cooper," he stuttered.

"It's just Cooper! And stop playing with your mustache, it makes me nervous when you do that."

It was hard for John to be spoken down to like that. He was at least twenty years Cooper's senior, and yet he left his office feeling like he was a small child just scolded by his father. What could he do? He needed the money. He needed what little confidence the job inspired in him. He wanted his wife to be proud of him again.

All day long Debbie treated him with disrespect. When she spoke it was with disdain. When she didn't speak she threw him dirty looks and turned away from him with aversion. And John couldn't make the sounds go away. The thumping, constant, unalterable thumping. The odorous perfume was driving him crazy, intermingled as it was with his memories of the thumping, the loud knocking at his door, and the breaking of glass. If he didn't find a solution to this problem, he knew how it would end. The fact is he already knew what the solution was, but he was unwilling to admit it to himself. He lacked enough courage to stand up for himself.

The next couple of mornings came and went without any further misfortune. In fact, in a stroke of good fortune, John's wife Maribel had not only cleaned up the glass, but also hired a man to replace the broken window. However, she cautioned John, "Don't think this means we're gettin' back together. I'm just trying to be helpful, nothin' more."

At the bank, John Dewey was just starting to get the hang of using the computer system to enter in customer loan applications. The first time he completed one by himself, the older

married couple seated at his desk waited somewhat impatiently as he carefully hammered out their information on the keyboard over a period of about two hours. As John's fingers pounded out each letter on the keyboard one by one, his fears seized him and he began to hear thumping inside of his head again. He looked around, thinking for a moment that he was back inside of his home being haunted by the steady pacing of footsteps on his roof. When the irritating noise in his head had reached a climax, John Dewey suddenly stopped typing, threw his arms over his head and crouched down behind his desk while uttering a frightful outcry. The couple seated at his desk didn't know what to think as they sat staring, first at each other and then at John, attempting to silently decide if they should stay or leave. Debbie, who was sitting beside him, stood up and left for the break room out of embarrassment. After a few moments John snapped out of his delusion and apologized profusely to the couple. "No problem," they said as they eyed the exit.

After several more attempts that day, he became slightly more efficient at the process and showed a little improvement. Each time his friend Stanley passed by John's desk he would smile and say something like, "I can tell you're starting to get a grip on this thing," or "This is the hardest part, it'll be over soon," and, "John, I'm so glad for you. Clearly, this is going to work out for the better."

John Dewey went home Thursday night feeling just a little bit better. The deafening sound of the pounding on his door earlier that week seemed as if only a nightmare, fading from memory. He went to sleep early so as to catch up on some much needed rest. That night he slept so soundly, he didn't even hear the thumping noises. However, the good night's rest left him completely unprepared for the events that were to befall him on the following day.

It was five o'clock in the morning on Friday, while in a deep sleep, his dreams had taken hold of him. He was in grade school, being drilled in arithmetic by a very stern teacher whose name he couldn't remember, but her face was recognizable in his dream. She appeared almost exactly as she had in real life almost fifty years ago, except that her head was enlarged about five times normal, the volume of her voice was louder and the pace of her speech was painfully slow. She was giving the class an arduous review of multiplication tables. "Eight times four equals thirty-two," she said with precision. The board made a nasty screech as she wrote furiously on the chalk board. "Eight times five equals forty. Eight times six equals forty-eight," she continued to sputter. Another series squeaks, like the obnoxious sound of nails sliding down the chalkboard. "Eight times seven equals fifty-six. Eight times eight equals sixty-four." Squeak, squeak again came the sour noise, like the staccato of dissonant notes repeatedly being struck on a piano. "Eight times nine equals what? John?" she yelled. "What is eight times nine?" her voice drummed, growing impatient.

"I don't know!" John Dewey said, frustrated. He ran his fingers through his hair in anguish.

"John, you will answer! What is eight times nine?"

"I don't know! I don't know! I don't know!" he shouted.

"John! John! John!" the voice yelled out, breaking the stillness of the night as his dream merged into reality.

The knocking had returned again in a fury, pounding and pounding and pounding. John Dewey at last awoke from his nightmare only to be thrust into one of a different sort. He got up and ran towards the living room, his heart racing and sweat dripping from his brow. John was more agitated than before and so he crawled on his belly like a soldier trying to stay hidden in a

battlefield. As he peeked around the corner of the wall he could see the form of the shadow looming once again in the light of his back porch. This time the silhouette was much more lucid, because he had carelessly left the blinds to the windows open. After another series of pounding, the indistinct figure ran off down the hill into the trees and left him to gaze upon his very own writing on the wall, except in his case, it was written on the outside of the large glass window in his living room.

John Dewey stayed crouched low on the ground until daylight came, having had difficulty separating the memories of arithmetic drills from the frightful disturbances that he had experienced all week. The unmistakable noise of the thumping came back again, heavy footsteps stomped from one end of his roof to the other, and back again. He felt trapped, a prisoner in his own home, not knowing the way out. He walked towards the window, bright morning rays of sunlight shining through on its northeastern corner. A new horrifying message had been etched over the glass, this time in black lipstick: *“This is your last warning. I’m coming to see you whether you like it or not.”*

His watch read nine o’clock when he noticed that the parking lot was full of cars, as he had arrived late that morning for the third time. Unable to think of anything else, he slowly marched through the lobby doors of the bank, determined to track down the source of his problem. As he walked through the lobby, John Dewey hardly noticed the smell of popcorn as Mr. Baskin the guard said to him in a frantic whisper, “I told you, my suspicions were correct! It’s a madhouse in here today!”

In a daze, John Dewey marched into the back of the bank towards his desk, struggling to find a way to handle the threats. As he passed by the restrooms he could overhear two voices inside

as the door to the ladies' room swung open and Nancy came out. She had exited so fast that she didn't even see him as she raced towards the break room. John didn't say a word. He slowed down so that he could more clearly hear the conversation.

"What?" the woman said in disbelief. "You don't mean John Dewey do you?"

"Yes I do. Believe me, this is getting settled *today*," the other woman replied. He recognized it to be Debbie's voice. He could hear the two women laugh as the door closed shut again.

That settles it then. Debbie must be the source of this problem of mine.

Whatever it was that she wanted from him, it was apparent that she intended to make good on her threat sometime that day. He worked nervously all morning, skipped lunch, and continued on into the late afternoon. Still, nothing happened. Debbie didn't stir.

The stress and anxiety of what might happen became too much for John Dewey to bear. He asked Stanley if Cooper was in his office. He received an affirmative answer and walked right inside without knocking. "Mr. Cooper sir, there's been an emergency at my house and I'm going to have to leave early today," John said. He wasn't accustomed to lying, but today the fabricated excuse came to him without difficulty as he was not going to take a chance with this problem any longer. Cooper looked at him silently for a few moments.

"When do you need to leave?" asked Cooper.

"Immediately," John said with a note of finality.

"I did need to talk to you before you left today, but I suppose it can wait. It's already four-thirty anyway. Go ahead, take care of whatever you need to," Cooper said with nonchalance.

With that he turned and quickly left the man's office. On the way out he passed by Stanley, who tried to inquire as to why his friend was looking so morose. John Dewey said nothing at all

and then started to run outside. Stanley followed, but by the time he made it to the parking lot all he saw was the back of John's truck as it sped down the street. Puzzled by this turn of events, he walked back inside to question Cooper about what had happened, and passed Debbie on her way out. Upon learning what Cooper's decision was, Stanley became angry and objected vehemently.

"I had to let him go Stanley, you know he's not up to the job. I had no choice! If I had known you were still here, I'd have given his last paycheck to you to drop off at his house instead of Debbie," Cooper said in a matter of fact way.

"Debbie! You sent Debbie to fire the man?" he shouted. Angered, Stanley left in a hurry, slamming the door to Cooper's office behind him.

John Dewey rushed home from work, grabbed the telephone in the kitchen, and dialed his wife Maribel. He explained everything he suspected about Debbie and what he believed might yet happen. While he was still on the phone with her, a realization came over him prompted by what he saw in the living room. There were several large piles of empty, used Styrofoam containers, some of them still showing remnants of food left behind. John Dewey dropped the receiver and began to run through the house in a panic. He ran into his bedroom and grabbed a suitcase from inside of his closet, intending to leave as quickly as possible. Suddenly the bedroom door slammed shut and out from behind it appeared a large man, who surprised John by putting a knife to his throat. It was Stanley. But instead of the neat, orderly looking banker, he saw a wild eyed, deranged looking man. His blond hair was ruffled like a feather duster that had just been used. Stanley's complexion was red with anger. His bad teeth seemed even more yellow and dirty than usual, and gone was the sparkling smile that he normally wore. In its place was a gaping mouth, drooling and spitting, with an evil grin.

He quickly overpowered John, tying his arms and legs to the bed posts, and stood glaring at him, shaking his head. “Look at you!” Stanley shouted. “So scared, so stupid, I told you I’d make good on my threat! Running around your house like a scared little cat every morning. I want it, now give it to me!”

“It was you all along. All the signs seemed to point at Debbie.” John struggled in vain against the bindings.

“Debbie? She hardly even knows you pal. Why would you think that?”

“Because of the perfume, I smelled lavender perfume on the porch every morning and assumed it was hers.”

“That wasn’t perfume you idiot. You really are the village idiot aren’t you? That was my cologne!”

“It wasn’t only that, it was also the messages. The note I got in my mailbox said, *‘John - You’ve got exactly what I want. Now that she’s gone we can do this. It’s time to make the deal. Next time I’ll break down your door.’* Then the message in black lipstick on the window said, *‘This is your last warning. I’m coming to see you whether you like it or not.’* It looked as if Debbie had some kind of obsession with me. I also overheard some talk at the bank that made me feel certain she was trying to get me fired.”

“Yeah, she was trying to get you fired, but the note was from me,” Stanley confirmed. He approached the bed, spit flying from his mouth as he spoke. “You do have what I need - this house, more space for my valuables. The note I left you said, ‘make the deal’ as in, *sell me your house*, and your wife shouldn’t have been a hindrance since she had left you. The writing on the glass was also from me, and just as I promised I’m here to settle this business tonight. That was

your last warning.”

“Well, it wasn’t until just now when I noticed the pile of Styrofoam containers in my living room that it dawned on me that you had been here, inside my house, trying to steal space for all your so-called collectibles!” John said, trying desperately to break free from his restraints. “This is unbelievable, you definitely aren’t playing with a full deck,” John said as he pictured the piles of empty containers that Stanley had stacked in his living room.

“Years ago I made you an offer for this house and it was fair. But you always refused to make a deal with me, until now anyway. I’ve got news for you John. You’re gonna sign it over to me right now for a dollar. I have the necessary papers, and a check for a dollar made out to one John Dewey - idiot.”

“No, we told you that you can’t have it! I built this place with my own two hands. It’s our home! I’m not gonna sell it, not for half price, not even for full price, let alone give it away for a dollar, you nut!”

“You know, I had thought that you were holding out because your old lady Maribel didn’t want to sell.” Stanley laughed, cackling like a chicken. “But, it was you too, you just don’t want to deal. You make no sense at all, can’t even keep your woman around can you? And just so you know, you stink at that banking job,” he said in disgust. Stanley paced back and forth around the bed where John was tied.

“If I’m so bad at it, then why did you get me the job in the first place?” John asked, briefly resting from his attempt to break free.

“If it weren’t for me, Cooper would have fired you on the first day, but I had to keep you on the job. Think about it. If you lost your job, would you have been in a mood to sell this place?”

You'd have probably broke down and would never consider giving it up." He jumped on top of the bed, his face so close to his prisoner that John could feel and smell the stench of his hot breath. With the ugly grin still on his face, Stanley continued, "But I can see you're still refusing and that's okay John, I've made other arrangements." He pushed the knife up firmly against John's chin.

A calm expression of relief came over John's face. A voice called from behind the intruder, "Hello Stanley." He started to turn around and saw a very tall woman from the corner of his eye.

"Maribel?" he said in disbelief.

"Now don't turn around. You're the stupid one aren't ya? My knife's bigger than yours," she said, holding up a large fillet knife to the back of his head. She led him out of the bedroom into the living room and opened the back door.

"I've watched this place for months, peeked through the windows in between the cracks of the curtains. John lives alone, how could you have known I was here?" he questioned.

"We may not live together anymore, but we still know each other real well. You may have fooled my husband, but you never fooled me. I know when my Johnny's in trouble. I knew it was you when he showed me that note."

She held the large knife close to his back and pushed Stanley outside on the back porch that butted up against a thick field of trees. Maribel sunk her knife in deep and thrust his body down the hill. She turned around and went back inside looking for a towel in the kitchen.

"I told ya Johnny! I told ya what would happen if you didn't take care of this." She strolled into the bedroom to untie her husband. "Ya never could stand up for yourself, could ya Johnny?" she said, wiping the knife off on an old dish towel.

Smiling Johnny said, “Stanley’s insane! I knew you’d come back Maribel. All those thumping noises have gone away now. Thank you.”

At that moment, another knock came at the door.

“Who is it?” Maribel yelled, heading to the front door.

“It’s Debbie, from the bank!” the voice answered.

“What do you want?” Maribel said as she opened the door.

“Oh, hello. Mrs. Dewey?”

“Who did you say you were again?”

“Debbie. I work with your husband at the bank.” She sounded exasperated.

“Yes, won’t you come in?” Maribel spoke with an uncharacteristic sweetness. After she let her in, she closed the door and turned the latch.

“Your husband’s been fired,” Debbie said coldly. “His employer sent me with his check. It’s just not working out.” She held out an envelope, her facial expression smug.

“Johnny!” Maribel called out.

“Yes?” he said from the bedroom.

“You gonna take care of this or you want me to?” she asked.

He replied, “Why don’t you go ahead sweetheart, I like the way you handled the last one.”