Protecting the Home

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Not that Frank Bell didn’t remember his ideals on occasion. For instance, one warm day in June when three men in dark suits came into his bank, looking more like CIA agents than the glorified accountants they really were.

“Francis Kane, Federal Regulation Service,” said the one in the middle. He checked his wristwatch and surveyed Frank’s office quickly. “We’d like to speak with an employee of yours named Raymond Kelly. Is he in today?”

His fingertips sweaty and a migraine starting to rise up in his head, Frank buzzed his secretary and asked him to page Kelly. Frank and Ray sometimes played racquetball, and on occasion they’d get together, along with their wives, and go to Ricky’s or one of the other fancy restaurants in Uptown. They’d even collaborated on some investment work.

Ray was smiling when he came in. Then he noticed the three goons. “Frank, what’s -”

“Are you Raymond Kelly? Francis Kane, Federal Regulator’s. Would you place your hands in front of you please? You have the right to remain silent . . .”

Ray had time to throw Frank one startled, pale look and say, “Call Carol, will you?” before they led him handcuffed out into the now staring lobby. Frank looked up the number and jotted it down for his secretary, then took off early to go see his lawyer.

When he finally got home that evening he felt calmer, although not much. June was his favorite month of the year, even when it was hot like this. The sky was a bright clear blue fading into a rich yellow in the west, and the elms over the garage were so dark and green that you felt cooler just looking at them. As he got his brief case out of the trunk he paused. The automatic sprinklers whirred quietly. The muscles in his neck and shoulders began to relax somewhat. This was nice. When he was growing up, their house had been right next to an off-ramp from the highway and the
dull grind of diesel engines and braking tires served as a background music for all his childhood memories. It had taken him a lot of years and a lot of wrangling before he could get out to the suburbs.

His younger daughter, Daisy, met him at the door. “Hi, Daddy! How are you?”

He stopped on the porch and looked at her with a wary smile. “Fine, petalhead. How are you?” When she said good and kept smiling, he became suspicious. She hated that nickname. Then she took his coat and offered to run for some lemonade, and he knew for certain something was up. He settled into the old laz-e-boy by the window and pretended to flip through the sports section.

“Guess what?” she said when she came back with the lemonade. The ice rattled in the cool glass.

“What?”

She shrugged and began to drift casually around the room, stopping to touch the flowers that Beth had brought in from the garden, letting her fingers flutter just above the delicate Hummel shepherd she knew she wasn’t supposed to pick up. She stopped at the aquarium and tapped on the glass.

“Honey - “ Frank stopped himself. His migraine was starting to kick in again. He tried to calm down. “You’ll scare the fish,” he finished weakly.

She bit her lip and pulled an apologetic face. “Scott Sheffard’s got a B.B. rifle.”

“Oh really?” He waited for her to go on. When she didn’t he asked, “Is it a nice one?”

She nodded and placed her hand flat against the glass. “He got it for his birthday.” The pale light from the aquarium flickered off her cheeks. A silver and black angel fish swam around the air pump. “I’m not tapping it, see? I’m just putting my hand here.”

“I see.” She turned nine in less than two weeks. He wondered where his wife was. Already Daisy had learned
to divide and conquer. Together Frank and Beth usually provided a unified front, but get them apart and Daisy knew she had a chance. He suddenly wished he’d scheduled his vacation a month earlier.

“I sure would like one of those rifles,” Daisy said and tapped the glass again.

He changed into shorts and a t-shirt and went downstairs. Beth was moving furiously around the kitchen, her hair in a loose sweaty bun, her hands dripping in front of her as she moved from the sink to the refrigerator and back to the sink again.

“Broccoli or asparagus, what do you think? Hope is bringing Chuck over tonight.” She unrolled a package of meat and Frank stopped in his tracks.

“Porkchops! What’s going on here?” Beth didn’t like supporting people who raised animals just to make a buck.

“I told you, Hope invited Chuck over for dinner tonight. What do you think, asparagus or broccoli? I suppose we could have both.”

Frank bent at the waist and concentrated on his back muscles. “Has Daisy talked to you about this B.B. gun thing?” He stood up and did a knee bend. His joints cracked.

Beth held a porkchop under a stream of running water. She rolled her eyes. “I should have figured she’d ask you about that. I told her specifically if she asked me one more time I’d throttle her, if that’s what you mean. She’s been bothering me about it all day.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Beth dropped the chop on the counter with a wet slap! She began on another. “Things are bad enough in this world without teaching a nine-year-old girl how to shoot a gun.”

“That’s a little sexist, don’t you think?” Frank teased.

“Things are bad enough in this world without teaching little boys how to use a gun either. You’re not going to go play basketball, are you?”

“I was, actually.”
Her blue eyes searched his face carefully.  
“Bad day at work?”

“Sort of.” He moved close enough to his wife so that he could smell her. When she was harried like this she had a warm, electric scent. The way he felt now he would have liked to curl up with her on their bed, just for a few moments. He did another deep knee bend.

“You better hurry.” _Slap!_ “Chuck will be here at seven.”

“Who’s Chuck?”

“Oh, Frank!” Beth laughed. “I cannot believe you! Chuck is Hope’s boyfriend; she’s been dating him since the prom.”

Frank probed his memory for an image. Had they met before? When was prom? A brief parade of peach-fuzzed young men marched through his head. He took a guess. “The guy with the puffy hair? The earring guy?”

Beth turned off the faucet. “You’re unbelievable. That was Kurt. He was a skier, remember? That was nearly a year ago.”

“She has a new boyfriend?” He felt embarrassed asking, but he really couldn’t remember. “Have I met him?”

“No, you haven’t met him. But Hope was all upset because she was afraid no one would ask her to the prom, remember? Then she met Chuck downtown somewhere and the two of them went together. Where have you been? Oh come on, I know I have a broiling pan here somewhere.”

Beth rattled around in one of the lower cupboards before finally emerging victoriously.

“I don’t know where I’ve been,” said Frank, and he really didn’t. This was not a good day. “It’s beyond me why Hope would be so intent on getting a new boyfriend now. She leaves for Harvard in two months.” He put his hand on the door to the garage, then hesitated. “Oh, by the way, some federal agents came in today and arrested Ray.”

Beth stopped, the broiler in mid-air. Her mouth was
open. "Oh my God. What happened?"

"They think he's been making some illegal investments, using customer funds, real estate, that sort of thing." Frank tried to keep his voice neutral. The last thing he needed was Beth getting upset.

She put the pan down and leaned back against the counter with one hand over her mouth. Her fingers, a little red from the cold water, were beautiful and thin, strong. "Do you think he was? Doing that, I mean?"

"I don't know. There's a fine line I guess, what's legal and what isn't."

Beth dropped the chops one by one onto the pan. Frank again felt that urge to curl up in a dark room with his wife. Instead he opened the back door.

"I wish you hadn't told me that," she said. "Hope is worried about Chuck meeting us, and now I'm going to be distracted."

He shot baskets for an hour, working up a good hard sweat, trying to tire himself out, calm his frayed nerves. He almost expected a plain looking car to pull up at the end of the drive, and three men in dark suits to get out and start walking toward him. When he came in it was almost seven and he didn't have time to shower. It was just as well. He'd been right at least in part: Chuck did have dark puffy hair, and a small diamond stud twinkled in his left ear.

Frank made an effort to be friendly. "So, what are your plans after high school, Chuck?"

"Well," said Chuck and Hope shifted slightly in her seat. She was the kind of girl people called "attractive," and sometimes Frank wondered if they shouldn't have encouraged her to spend less time studying and more time doing social things—horseback riding or ballet maybe.

"Chuck just got back from the Brahmaputra," she interrupted her boyfriend. "In India."

"The what?" Daisy said shrilly.

"Daisy, there's no need to yell." Beth's voice was
even. Frank took a bite of porkchop. The meat was too salty.

“He was tour guide.” Hope’s eyes were a little wild. She sprinted on. “He used to lead raft tours, didn’t you, Chuck?”

Chuck bobbed his head, chewing steadily. He swallowed. “These are great porkchops, Mrs. Bell. Nice and salty.” His earring sparkled.

Beth smiled, and anyone who hadn’t been married to her for twenty years would have thought she was pleased. She put some peas on Daisy’s plate. “So Chuck, what are you doing since you got back to the States?”

“I’m working down at Custard Street Shell, actually, as a mechanic. I do oil changes and - “

“You’d be surprised how much money they make, really,” Hope said. She tugged on a strand of blond hair. “And he’s going to enroll in the G.E.D. course next fall, aren’t you Chuck?”

“The G.E.D?” echoed Frank. He wondered briefly if there were going to be any more wonderful surprises today, perhaps an avalanche or a flood, maybe an airplane landing on their garage. He decided he’d better give Ray Kelly a call after dinner.

“It’s my birthday in thirteen days,” Daisy cut in. “Guess how old I’m going to be.”

“Actually,” said Chuck, “I know it sounds kind of strange, but I really enjoy working on cars. It’s kind of soothing, taking things apart, putting things back together again.” He smiled briefly in Frank’s direction, then stared down at his fork. “I know it sounds kind of strange,” he repeated.

Frank made another effort to be agreeable. “No, that’s interesting. Kind of like Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, right?” He tried to catch his wife’s eye.

Chuck’s face was puzzled. “Pirsig?”

“You might go on to tech school, right Chuck?” Hope
smiled desperately. "Or maybe even college."
"Last year, we went to Ponderosa for my birthday. For dessert I had strawberries this big," Daisy made a circle with her hands roughly the size of a grapefruit. "When we got home I barfed." The table was silent. "A lot too, all over the bathroom."
"Jesus," muttered Frank. He had the sense he was trapped in a bad episode of The Brady Bunch: chaos erupts and the Brady home, and Jim, fresh from a day at the office, takes it all in stride with a smile.
"Daisy, not at the table." Beth's voice was taut.
"Well what am I supposed to say?"
"Nothing," said Hope.
"I don't care," Beth groaned. Frank could tell she was about to erupt. "But you know better than to talk like that."
"So how old did you say you were again, Chuck?"
Frank interjected, not solely because he wanted to change the subject.
"Twenty-five."
"I'm going to get a B.B. rifle for my birthday."
"That's it!" Beth stood up with her plate. She reached across the table and started picking up silverware. "Supper is over."

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Later, when they had a moment alone, Frank led Beth up to their room and turned off the lights. For awhile they just stayed there, curled up together on top of the bed. He listened to his wife’s breathing, trying to match it so that their bodies moved ever so slightly together. Just as he was about to fall asleep, she sat up suddenly and flipped on the lights. Her hair was tousled and her eyes were dark.

“What do you think about this?”

“About what?” Frank asked.

“This . . . this Chuck thing. What do you think?”

“I - “

“We weren’t like that, were we?” Beth stood up and paced around the room. She paused in front of the mirror and smoothed a few loose locks behind her ear. “I mean, ‘it’s kind of strange, but I really enjoy working on cars. It’s soothing.’” She mimicked Chuck’s voice.

“You might want to be careful, honey. I think they’re on the porch.” Frank moved off the bed and shut the front window. Outside, yellow lights poked through the dark neighborhood.

“An auto-mechanic.” She unbuttoned her jeans, pulling the denim down fiercely over her hips. She was wearing a pair of pink cotton underwear. “It’s not like Hope’s a smart girl, not like she’s a Merit scholar or anything. I can’t believe this. Why him?”

“I suppose she finds him interesting.” A dark fleet of worst-case scenarios floated through Frank’s mind.

“And twenty-five! Can you believe it? Most of the boys in her own class seem too old for her.” Beth was sitting on the bed now, pulling her shirt off. Her breasts, though a bit tired after nursing two children, still retained most of the shape they’d had in college. Frank calculated, briefly, how long it would be before the two of them could crawl safely into bed without having to worry about being interrupted.

“Frank, do you remember the things we used to do when we were twenty-five?”
He smiled: once while still dating, he and Beth had spent a week at his parents' house over the holidays. Unable to control themselves, they'd finally taken the car and driven out into the country for a "quickie." A few days later his mother—a narrow, sincere Lutheran—had come into the kitchen while Beth was out and asked Frank if he was "living sinfully."

"What do you mean?" He looked down at the unopened accounting book in front of him. He and Beth had been smoking and drinking coffee, talking about whether or not Nixon would consider himself to be a dictator.

His mother sat down in the chair next to him and put her nervous hands in her lap. Her hair was just beginning to turn gray, and she looked as though she hadn't been sleeping well. "I don't know, I'm just - " She shifted her thin shoulders back and looked at him earnestly. "Would you marry her? Do you love her?"

Frank rolled his eyes and let his hands drop onto the table with a slap. "Mom, what are you talking about? I've only known her for a few months. Beth and I enjoy each other's company, but it's a little too early to -" and then Beth had come in and he'd let it slide. The rest of the week he was very careful not to be in the same room alone with his mother. He and Beth had eventually gotten married, and it wasn't until after their second year together, when Beth was carrying Hope, that Frank found out his older sister had gotten pregnant in high school—when he'd been only four—and that his parents had paid for her to go away to a special home in Kansas.

Beth sat down and began to wipe cream on her face, the same thing she'd done every night for the last twenty years. "I don't know, Frank, I think you should mention it to her tomorrow. Maybe even right now. She's only seventeen."

"Have you talked to Daisy?" he asked.
"I told her no on the B.B. gun thing, but you might want to go see her as well. I get the feeling she thinks I’m just being a Mom."

It was getting darker now. In the window he could see his own reflection. He didn’t look bad really, considering his age, but his hair was thin and his eyes looked watery.

"Frank?"

He started, realizing that his wife had asked him a question. "I’m sorry, what was that?"

"Maybe you should go talk to Daisy now. The sooner she gets this idea out of her head, the better, don’t you think?"

He hesitated. "Yeah, I guess." He paused at the door and looked back at her. From where he was he could see the pale freckles on one bare shoulder moving in a circular motion as his wife rubbed the gel off her face.

Daisy was already lying in bed, the spread pulled up to her armpits. Frank had the eerie sensation that she had known he was coming.

"So how’s my Daisy, Queen of the Wildflowers?" He sat down next to her and straightened the covers even though they didn’t need it.

"Okay," she said, but didn’t smile. "You’re not going to let me have the rifle either, are you?"

He shifted. "No honey, I’m afraid I’m not."

For an instant he expected her to cry—in a sense he almost wanted her too—but she just looked at the ceiling and blinked. When her eyes came back to his face she looked more genuinely angry than he’d ever seen her before.

"It’s because I’m a girl, isn’t it?"

Frank shook his head. "No, it’s not because you’re a girl."

"Then why is it? Don’t you think we should have a gun to protect the house from burglars?"

He remembered once when they’d gone camping while the girls were still young. In the woods not far from
their site he’d stumbled across the fly-covered carcass of a calf that had gotten lost. He went back to the tent and told his wife, and the two of them, afraid that Daisy would find the corpse herself and get scared, led her out there, explaining along the way how nature worked in cycles, how some things died and then made it so that other things could live. They’d expected her to be curious, to have some questions, maybe even to be a little scared, but they hadn’t expected her to bawl the way she did when she saw the remains, and they certainly weren’t prepared for the nightmares she had for weeks after.

He tugged the covers again. “There are just some things that people shouldn’t have to deal with until they’re older. A gun is one of them. Your mother and I think it would be better if you learned how to play with other things now instead.”

Her eyes softened as she tried to figure it out. He bent down and kissed her lightly on the forehead, brushing his lips against her dry skin. She smelled like bubble bath. “If you want,” he told her, “we’ll talk about it more in the morning, okay?”

She nodded, scrutinizing him carefully. He waited until she kissed his cheek, then moved away from the bed, feeling dented and tarnished. He felt her watching him all the way out of the room.

In his study he shut the door quietly, then went over to the phone. Carol answered after half a dozen rings. She sounded perfectly normal.

“Hi, Carol. This is Frank Bell, from the bank. Is Ray around?”

There was a pause, then, “Sure, Frank.” Her voice sounded a notch more distant.

He glanced around the room while he waited. He liked being in here. It was one of the reasons he and Beth decided to buy this particular place. The study smelled of dark wood and it always seemed ten degrees cooler than the rest of the house. This house.
There was a click and Ray said, "Hello, Frank," and then another click, and Frank knew that the manager had sought a more private extension. "How are you?"

It seemed like a funny thing for a man who had been arrested to be asking. "I'm fine," said Frank. "What about you? Is everything okay?"

There was a sound like a sigh. "I'm still alive, I guess. It looks pretty bad though. My lawyer said I really shouldn't talk about it."

"Yeah, I know. That makes sense." Frank rubbed his face nervously. From his desk a picture of his family stared up at him, taken two years ago at Rocky Mountain National Park. "I'm sorry about all of this."

"Yeah, well -." Ray didn't go on. The two of them were silent for a bit. In Frank's photograph, his wife and two daughters posed high above a panorama of grey foothills and dark pine. The wind was blowing Beth's hair across her smile. The sky was blue.

"Did they - ?" Frank let the question hang.

"No," Ray answered. "They didn't ask. I think it's just me they want."

"Oh." Frank tried to keep from sighing in relief. The muscles in his chest relaxed for the first time all day.

"Listen," Ray's voice was drained. "I should go, all right? Thanks for calling."

"Sure. Let me know what happens."

In the darkened living room he paused by the picture window. Frank could see his daughter and Chuck out front, sitting on the huge porch swing, silhouetted against the pale brush of the street lights. They kissed once, then twice. He moved softly over the carpet toward the front door.

There was silence for a moment, then Chuck said something that Frank couldn't make out. They kissed again, and Hope spoke, her voice sounding so gentle that Frank almost didn't recognize it: "I am too."

He stood still, wondering if he should go and interrupt, and then he heard his daughter say, "I love you," and
Chuck reply, “I love you too.” The words were simple and foolish, Frank knew—coming from two people who were completely ignorant of how the world really was—but something in his daughter’s voice stopped his breath. He thought about his wife lying up in their room watching the evening news, about his youngest daughter curled up between Winnie the Pooh sheets. He thought about Ray Kelly, and his own parents and the family they had, his sister and the questions his mother asked about Beth. He had a sense suddenly of seeing his life from a different angle, one that turned the foreground into the background and brought the background into the light, showing not the people themselves, but the spaces between the people and the lines that connected or held them apart.

He stepped back and moved into the dark kitchen. He flipped on the lights and made a point of slamming the cupboard doors and banging a lot of pots and pans as he got himself a glass of milk. He returned to the hall and stopped by the front door. He leaned his head in the direction of the screen.

-Paul Hanstedt