

Refugees

by Larry Strattnr

Four in the morning. I catch the guy, clod clumped, climbing out of a tunnel mouth in my backyard. I'm awake because I'm always awake. There are little fog-halos around the streetlights. I can see my entire backyard from the sliding glass doors in my kitchen. No tunnel opening had been there when I turned out the lights to try to go to bed.

I open the sliding door and say, "who the hell are you? And what the hell are you doing in my backyard? I just put forty dollars worth of fertilizer and dandelion control on this fucking lawn."

He's shaking dirt out of his hair. He leans over and drags a woman out of the hole. They're both huffing and puffing and spitting out dirt particles. They sit down on my lawn. "Who are you?" I ask again. "Where did you come from?"

"Shhhh" The guy holds his index finger to his lips. "No need for vulgarity. I'll get with you in a moment." He is patting the woman on the back like you burp a baby. Whispering to her. I cannot hear his words but his tone is comforting her while she spits out dirt.

After a few moments he stands up, walks over to me and whispers. "We tunneled over from the house behind you."

"What're you fucking nuts?" I hiss at him. He has his index finger up, shushing me again.

The lots are only fifty by one fifty in my neighborhood and my backyard is enclosed with an eight foot high, plank privacy fence. And the guy digs a tunnel into my yard like he's breaking out of San Quentin.

"The house, right there, outside my fence?" I hiss, pointing.

"Yeah. We tunneled out of the basement apartment. We didn't want him to know we're gone."

"Why didn't you just leave by the goddamn front door?" I drool a little on my pajamas. It's difficult to keep hissing without drooling.

"We always say where we're going whenever we go out and it's tough to lie to my brother." The guy whispers. A picture forms in my

head of the owner of the house behind me, Big Bobby. A very large lumpy guy, stupid looking, vacant grin. He always seems happy, probably because all of his connections aren't tight. Like the guy in *Of Mice and Men*. Maybe dangerous.

"Why leave?" I say. "That's a nice house. I've seen the basement apartment. It's beautiful."

"Bobby smokes in the house. There's a lot of second hand smoke. It's dangerous to even go upstairs. We talked it over. The tunnel seemed like the best solution. Now we're clear. "Smell that night air Babe." He whispered to the woman. "Pure as a gram of uncut coke."

"Let's go Babe," the guy says helping the stringy haired woman stand up. "We're so out of here. If we move fast we can catch the bus to Beckley before Big Bobby figures out we're gone." And then they are gone. Leaving me in my misty back yard looking at the exit from the tunnel. *Who's going to fix this? Those goddamn idiots. This is going to ruin my backyard.*

I walk to the section of lawn behind the tunnel opening and extend my foot, pressing on the grass. It feels soft. I suspect it would since they had dug an increasingly shallow shaft as they came up to exit and the roof of the tunnel is probably not far beneath the lawn. Certainly not far enough to give any strength to the tunnel roof. *What in the good Christ were they thinking?*

As I seethe over the man and woman's dementia the tunnel mouth gapes at me. *Isn't this the strangest thing you've ever seen? We already know they are the strangest two people you've ever met. Why not take a deeper look into all of this? See if you can figure out the damage. What possessed them? What were they up to? What could their apartment tell you? Where's the dirt?*

Before rationality intervenes I'm crawling into the tunnel in my pajamas. It's not very well or carefully dug. Less like an escape tunnel and more like a mole tunnel where the tunneler noses enough dirt aside and packs it loosely into the walls and ceiling just so he or she can pass through and the devil take the hindmost. My body is already collecting the dirt clumps I saw all over the two idiots. I can feel the tunnel slanting down. At least they missed my in-ground

sprinkler system. That would have been cute. A major disaster. Big Bobby could go fishing in his cellar.

It's not much of a crawl. Fifty feet at most. I smell a faint odor of cigarette smoke creeping through the overtones of fresh dirt. Then I see luminosity. It's light from the cellar apartment shining through a poster hung to hide the tunnel entrance. The poster is of Axel Rose and Guns and Roses. I can't recognize Axel Rose backwards on the wrong side of a poster, but I can recognize Slash. He's distinctively weird looking no matter how you look at him.

I have to do a little tuck and roll headfirst out of the tunnel into the basement apartment. The tunnel entrance is a bit high off the floor. There's a beanbag underneath the poster that helps. A couple of small table lights are turned on. Like I said to the two idiots, the apartment is really nice. It's clean too. I wonder where they put all the dirt? The main room is nicely furnished with very high-end patio furniture, chairs, footstools, a glider, end tables and a beautiful glass-topped table for four. There is also a large screen projection TV with surround sound and a couple of futon-style couches. I can see the door to a bedroom at one end of the cellar and a full bath at the other. All-in-all pretty nice digs.

I'm standing in the center of the big room when all the recessed ceiling lights go on. I blink in the sudden brightness. There at the bottom of the stairs to the main floor is Big Bobby. "Who're you, dirtball?" He says. He has a hunting knife in his hand.

"Ralph, Ralph. I'm Ralph from next door. There was this tunnel. In my backyard. People came out. Your people. From here. I crawled through after they left. To see. You know me. Ralph." I lift up the Guns and Roses poster to show him the hole in the cellar wall.

"Yeah. I do know you. You're the shithead with the fence. Now you're outside it. You're in my basement. What'd you do with Virgil and Belva?"

"I told you. They tunneled into my back yard. They left."

"Oh yeah? Where's the dirt? Looks like you tunneled in here and left the dirt over on your side. Whaddo I look like, I'm stupid?" The smell of cigarette smoke was becoming strong with the upstairs

door open. I can also smell my own fear-sweat. Not a pleasant mixture. I'm watching the gleaming hunting knife.

"No, no, no. They came from this side. I don't know what they did with the dirt. They've gone to Beckley, they said. On the bus. Beckley."

"Oh Christ," says Big Bobby. "Beckley. My mother's in Beckley. They're going to stop and see my Mother. Christ. They'll tell her I'm smoking again. She'll be down here. She's gonna kick my ass all up and down the block. Oh Christ." Big Bobby sits down heavily on the third step from the bottom of the stairs puts the hunting knife down beside him, buries his head in his hands. "Whattam I gonna do?" He says. A tear runs out from under one of his hands.

"How about starting by telling me how you're going to fill in the goddamn tunnel?" I ask him.

