

Hearts in Exurbia

by R. A. Allen

THEIR relationship had hit a wall.

The fight had begun over dinner. At bedtime, it still smoldered like a hotspot in the ashes of house fire. Tillison pictured the airliner of their marriage slamming, 9/11-like, into the white cliffs of Dover. Those very cliffs had been a venue of their honeymoon seven years ago.

Noreen had her back to him, breathing rhythmically.

He, however, had been awake for hours, analyzing the roots of their dilemma. It wasn't money, they were successful professionals at the beginning of their peak-earning years—he, a comptroller for a growing condominium REIT; she, an ophthalmic pharmaceutical sales rep. It wasn't about children because they neither had nor wanted any. The closest he could figure was a drying-up of common interests.

Now, nearing the hypnagogic phase of slumber, Tillison fantasized about possible sex with Jackie, the pert redhead from Human Resources. If he left Noreen, would Jackie run off with him? He pictured them both running on a sugary beach like in an erectile dysfunction commercial.

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Noreen was barking at him. No, wait, not Noreen—Rad. Rad was their Siberian husky. Rad never barked, but he was barking his head off now. Noreen was exhorting him to wake up and see what was going on. There was a slam-bam hell-ruckus out on the deck, thumping and scratching—like poltergeists having their way with the patio furniture.

In the kitchen, he grabbed the first thing he could lay his hands on—a sponge mop—and switched on the backyard lighting. He stepped outside. A chair and a flowerpot were overturned. On the brickway between the deck and the pool, Rad was in a whirling, twisting, muzzle-to-snout clinch with a raccoon.

"Hey!" Tillison shouted, brandishing the mop.

Rad and the raccoon separated in a plume of blood, some of which spotted the tops of Tillison's bare feet, grossing him out. The raccoon, wounded, darted under the deck. Rad started to follow but thought better of it. The day's first bird was chirping.

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Beast Busters was Kenny and Murf in a rust-streaked pickup. Kenny, the PR man, was protected by a malodorous force field that made Tillison hold his distance. Silent Murf was largely toothless, and the gaze from his eyes diverged in opposing directions; his skinny arms were a fancywork of jailhouse tattoos and what appeared to be scabbed-over claw marks.

The four of them walked up the driveway. Kenny asked, "You said on the phone y'all got a coon up under yer deck?"

"Yes, Tillison said, he got into a fight with our dog."

"Real sorry 'bout yer dog, mister."

"Oh, our dog is okay," assured Noreen. "I think he won."

"That's a dog I'd like to meet."

To keep him out of the way, Rad was leashed to a statue of Chloris standing at the entrance to their terraced English garden. Rad sat up to greet them with a panting dog-smile.

Kenny squatted near the edge of the wooden deck and pointed a flashlight beneath it. "Yeah, I see 'im," he said.

Tillison wondered how they planned to extricate the raccoon. A snare pole like dogcatchers use? Nets? A trap? They'd not brought any equipment from their truck.

Kenny shifted the flashlight to his other hand and fished for something in the front pocket of his grimy khakis. Out came a small-caliber revolver with a longish barrel.

Noreen grabbed Tillison's upper arm. Audibly, she caught her breath.

Pow! Pow!

Tillison jumped. Noreen sunk her fingertips into his right bicep.

Kenny gave Murf a nod indicating the raccoon. "Awright," he said, "go get 'im." Murf dropped to his belly like a GI and wriggled beneath the deck

Noreen still clutched his arm. Tillison noted her expression as she absorbed the series of events: (1) shock-horror, (2) disbelief-surprise, (3) mirth. He knew she was translating the incident into a verbal entertainment for every social gathering they would attend for the next two weeks.

Covered in dirt, Murf reappeared, dragging the raccoon by its tail. Holding the carcass high, he announced, "Dog chewed its nose plumb off." For emphasis, he loosed a stream of brown quid juice onto a nearby rosebush.

Turning to Kenny, Tillison enquired about their fee.

"I charge a hunnert dollars fer a coon. But I'd like to make ya an offer on yer dog, mister," Kenny said with a wave in Rad's direction. "I'll drop my fee and give *you* four hunnert fer 'im." He produced a rubber-banded wad of bills from his pistol pocket.

Tillison politely declined and went into the house to write a check.

After Beast Busters had gone, they stood together in the backyard, two people who'd just shared an unnerving experience—nothing so drastic as alien abduction—but something out of the ordinary nonetheless. "You have to admit," said Tillison, "they were efficient."

Noreen said, "Poor Murf had one fuck of a case of exotropia, didn't he? I wonder how he could even see to walk in a straight line."

Tillison nodded in agreement.

Noreen reached out and grabbed Tillison's nose between the backs of her index and middle fingers. Pulling away, she showed him her thumb between the same fingers. "Got your nose," she said.

Tillison just had to laugh.

