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Bob Thurber

Winner of the 2007 Barry Hannah Prize for Fiction

If You'd Like to Make a Call

At ten minutes to midnight Dean stepped out of an airport taxi with a stuffed panda the size of an easy chair. He set the huge bear on the roof of the cab and looked beyond the ragged and overgrown hedges fronting his one-story house. He scanned the windows, checking for movement and light, then he turned his attention to the windows of the neighboring house. He steadied the panda with one hand and scratched at four days' worth of beard. While the cabdriver jotted something on a clipboard, Dean leaned on the taxi's open door; he worked his fingernails into the flesh beneath his beard as he studied the cars parked along the street. The driver said something. Dean startled, but made no reply as he reconsidered the front of his house. After a long moment he leaned into the cab and reached across the back seat for an aluminum baseball bat. The bat was wrapped in a cellophane skin. The woman at the gift shop had stuck a flattened blue bow over the price tag. Dean pulled his head out of the taxi and breathed in a chestful of air. He set the bat across the bear's legs.

The driver said, "We all set here, sir?"

Dean picked at a loop of ribbon, stretching the bow back to its original shape. Then he closed the rear door of the cab and stepped up to the driver's window. He smiled cockeyed and showed the man five fingers. "You wait. Okay? Ten, at most," Dean said. Then he took out his wallet and paid twice the fare. "Don't go anywhere, I mean it," he told the driver.

While the driver counted his money, Dean secured the bear in a headlock. He walked around the rear of the taxi, then up the driveway to the garage. He pressed his face against a window square, caught a glimpse of bare cement floor. Wielding the bat like a machete, he pushed through the high hedges bordering the driveway.

The sky was clear and the moon was full. Dean watched the windows as he circled the house. He listened to the crickets and to the swishing sound his trousers made in the tall grass. The rear porch light was on and the new key was in the window box. It was hard fitting the key in the lock until he put the bear down.

He used the bat to bump the door open. The moon forced his shadow across the floor, but he waited a ten count, listening, before he stepped into the kitchen, bear first. Seconds later the babysitter snapped on the overhead light. She put a hand to her mouth. Dean raised the bat and stepped forward. But then he

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recognized her, and she must have recognized him, even with the beard, because she didn't scream.

She was a skinny girl with long flat hair and a pimply chin. She apologized for being half-asleep. Her braces glittered as she smiled at the huge bear. She puffed out her chest, then smiled at Dean. Twirling the ends of her hair, she told him she knew everything, the whole story, but that it didn't matter. Not to her, anyway. She said as far as she was concerned Dean was still Billy's father. She said she respected that.

She went on to tell Dean a short tale about her own father, a man she'd never met. Dean stroked the point of his beard and listened to every word.

When she was though talking, Dean handed her twenty dollars and told her to gather her things. He said the ride home was on him, a bonus for doing such an outstanding job. At the front door he concentrated on her hips as she angled across the lawn. From the cab's window she called, "Welcome back, Mr. Forester," and she waved the twenty like a tiny flag.

After the taxi pulled away Dean looked in on Billy. The hall light sliced across the wallpaper, a baseball pattern set against a sea of green. Above the bed a book shelf crowded with small trophies cast slanted shadows.

Dean leaned the bat against a desk near the door. He put the bear on the bed, between the boy and the wall. He lifted a Red Sox cap off the bedpost and set it on the bear's huge head. He made some adjustments—to the bear, to the hat, to the collar of Billy's pajamas. Then he sat on the bed, on the very edge, knees together, and stroked the boy's hair.

After a minute of this, he stood up and tapped out a cigarette from the pack he'd bought at the airport. He clenched the cigarette between his teeth but didn't light it. He watched the boy sleep. He watched the sheet move up and down with the boy's breathing.

Dean paced for a while, staying within the border of an oval rug. He paced and he pretended to smoke the unlit cigarette.

Finally, from the inside pocket of his blazer, Dean brought out his copy of the restraining order. He angled the paper to catch the light, then moved it high and away to avoid his own shadow. As he read, he hummed part of a tune the taxi driver had played over and over on a trunk-sized cassette player. Dean hummed very softly. The cigarette wagged in his mouth. Then he put the paper away and reached down to smooth the boy's hair again.

He made a slight adjustment to the cap on the bear's head, then he lit the cigarette and smoked, watching the boy, pulling long slow puffs, turning away only to exhale.

Dean flicked ashes into his palm. When the cigarette had burned down he crossed the hall and emptied his hand over the toilet bowl. Bent low beneath the mirror he washed in the sink, squeezing the flower-shaped soap into a featureless ball. He used the towel monogrammed HIS, then carried it into the hallway. He

closed Billy's door, rolled the towel hand over fist, turned, pump-faked once, and shot the towel into the sink.

In the kitchen, he shut off the overhead light. Then he shut off the porch floodlights. The second he did, moonlight streamed onto the glossy cabinets and powdery walls. He admired the fall of shadows in the quiet kitchen for a moment then opened the porch door and put the key back in the window box. He heard a car on the street beyond the redwood fence. Dean squinted at the spaces between the houses in that direction, then he closed the door and hurried into the dining room. He stood away from the curtains and looked out. There were street lights and an occasional window light that gave the neighboring houses a soft glow. He watched the headlights approach, counted four heads as the car slowly passed. Then he stepped closer to the window and followed the taillights until the car turned off.

He went back to the kitchen and opened the fridge. He moved some things around—a jug of milk, a carton of eggs, a sticky jar of strawberry jam. He pushed aside a sealed Tupperware bowl and read the label on a long thin-necked bottle of vinaigrette. From the bottom shelf he took out an L-shaped slab of sheet-cake with green frosting and a half-dozen small figures in various baseball poses. He pulled out one of the figures, licked the frosting from its spike, then stabbed the figure back in. He slid the cake into the fridge and closed the door.

In the den the TV flickered quietly in a corner. He sat on the sofa and fingered his beard. There were pretzels in a bowl beside the phone and he took one. It was fat as a cigar. He crunched it between his back teeth, found the remote and shut off the TV. When his shoulders started to tremble, he put his chin down. He stroked his beard and picked lint from his trousers while he waited to cry. He could feel himself filling up.

The phone rang and he jolted upright. He lifted the receiver to his ear but didn't say anything. There was music, muddled voices, part of a drum roll. He heard a woman shriek, then a sharp click and the music stopped.

Dean hung up the phone but kept his hand on the receiver. While he waited, he moved a magazine with a yellow-haired guitar player on the slick cover. Someone had used a sharp pen to carve a heart shape around the guitar player's head. Dean traced the image with his thumb nail until the phone rang again.

This time, above the thumping music, came his wife's voice.

"Edna? Hello? Edna, it's Vivian."

Dean held his breath.

"Edna?" the caller said.

Over the music a man's voice broke in, "Earth to Edna, come in Edna!"

"Stop it," Vivian said. "Let go. Will you let go?"

When the music stopped Dean listened to the silence for a while then he rested the receiver on the pretzel bowl. He lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the phone. Somewhere outside, a dog barked.

Dean flicked ashes into the bowl. He stroked his beard and looked at the window. When a faint voice said, "If you'd like to make a call, please hang up. . . ."

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Dean stuffed the receiver deep between the sofa cushions.

He stayed on the couch, chain smoking and using the bowl as an ashtray. At one point, he pushed the heart-shape through the magazine's cover; he held the open magazine to his face, blew smoke rings through the hole. When he heard a car's motor, he pulled one last hit into his lungs, then crushed the cigarette onto a pretzel.

He hurried down the hall to Billy's room. He stepped inside and closed the door. The boy was using one leg of the stuffed bear as a pillow. From the other room he heard voices. Then he heard his wife: "We're back. Edna! Edna, we're home!"

A man's voice echoed, "Edna!"

Dean removed his blazer and hung it on a bed post.

"If she went home and left him... I swear... So help me God."

"Chill out," the man said.

"Edna!"

Dean stood with his ear to the door and his eyes on the boy. He rolled his shirt-sleeves and listened to the two of them call out together.

"Probably making out with the pizza boy," said the man. "Check our room."

Dean fingered his beard. He watched the light beneath the door.

"I smell smoke," his wife said.

Dean heard the clack of heels on hardwood.

"Russ. Russ, I smell smoke."

"Easy, Viv! Don't pull on me. You'll tear open my stitches."

Then he said, "What do you make of this?"

There was a short silence, then Vivian said, "Edna doesn't smoke."

"Then who—" the man said.

Dean picked up the bat.

"I don't know who. But those are not Edna's."

"Let's find out.," the man said. "Hey Edna! Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Dean heard his wife say, "Russ, wait. Let's call the police."

"For what? We don't know anything. You hunt for sleeping beauty. I'll check on DiMaggio Junior."

"Russ, wait," the woman said.

Dean slapped the bow off the handle. He adjusted his grip, then rested the barrel against his shoulder.

"Daddy?"

Dean didn't turn, didn't look at the boy. He strained to hear the voices in the hall.

"Is it still my birthday, Daddy?"

"Hey Billy," Dean whispered. "Hey sport." He cocked his elbow, set his stance. "Close your eyes a minute, son."