



ILLUSTRATION:
BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

The Break In

ARIF ANWAR

They came home and found the backdoor open. Stan, who was the last one out, had forgotten to lock it. But there was no *I told you so* from Carla as she traipsed around to assess the damage, which wasn't much—one smashed chair and a bed that looked slept in, both Junior's. Also Junior's, a bowl of porridge on the kitchen that was full when they left but was now licked clean. A steady boy of a year and a half, Junior took all this in calmly. He had what Carla called a *quiet head*. He'd gotten that from her.

Carla took big sniffs of the chair and bed as Stan frantically inventoried the house for things stolen.

"It was a girl," she concluded when he came back (quickly, for theirs was a modest home).

"No way."

"You should've smelled her as soon as we came in. Plus," she held up a strand of hair that flashed golden in the late morning sun.

"Could've been coyotes, jackals," Stan said.

"They wouldn't dare. I've never known one to break The Hierarchy. Besides, they always spray. You smell spray?"

"No."

"There you have it," she sat on their son's bed and it creaked alarmingly under her four hundred pounds. Stan took his wife in. Today she wore her usual, a muu-

muu they'd bought at the big and tall store at town last year. The fuchsia flower pattern contrasted with her dark fur. The sides were strained to their limits despite being hand-patched to accommodate her girth. It wasn't Stan's favorite. In fact, he didn't like clothes on her at all.

"So what now?"

"Now nothing. It was a girl. Nothing was stolen. We let it go."

"We should call the cops".

The noise she made was half laugh, half grunt. "Probably not a good idea. We pay our goddamn head tax, don't we?"

"How's that working out for us so far?"

In the end he insisted, and Carla threw up her paws. He called from the rotary phone in their kitchen on whose dial their claws had carved circles over the years. When the operator patched him through, the officer taking the report at the end of the line paused when Stan told him where they lived. Stan was informed that a police car would get there but that it would take a while.

"How long?"

"A while, pal," the officer hung up.

He relayed this to Carla, who nodded, her face clotting with disapproval.

He went out to the porch to wait for the cops.

It was eleven, but the day was already hot and dry, the valley trembling under stern sunlight. Inside, Carla worked on

the times tables with Junior. He was happy to let Carla take the lead in these things; although he couldn't read worth a damn, she'd been given a few years of learning from her mother's owner. And Junior was a bright child. They were hopeful that he might move to a human school for the fifth standard. One could dream.

After an hour of waiting there was the faint hum of an engine. It grew louder until there it was: a cop car climbing down the hill waggling a squirrel tail of dust. Stan watched as it took a full five minutes to cover the two miles between the hilltop and his house, pull into their driveway, etching tire tracks onto the gravel for the first time that he could think of.

The lone cop inside was anonymous in hat and sunglasses. He didn't step out for a while, his attention held by something on the console that he poked while the car engine pinged and cooled.

Stan stayed on the porch, on all fours, careful to not approach or make sudden moves.

The man had seen him.

When the cop finally got out of the car Stan climbed down and stood up, his forelegs held to the sides, claws in. The officer walked up to him, a man well over six feet but only reaching Stan's chest.

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