

Decision Point

Mike Blanton kept a loaded shotgun beside his bed. He didn't do that while Linda was alive. She would have been horrified by the very idea of keeping a loaded gun in the house, afraid that somehow it would go off by itself or that someone would accidentally shoot themselves. But the neighborhood gone downhill in the ten years since she died.

The decline actually started a few years before Linda died, when the plant where Mike worked closed. They were "consolidating all manufacturing operations to remain competitive" according to the corporate announcement. During the meeting to announce this to the employees the union steward asked if it was just a coincidence that they were consolidating everything to a plant in another country, but that made no difference. Mike thought he was one of the lucky ones, as he qualified for an early retirement bonus. He and Linda were able to pay off the mortgage on the house where they'd raised their children and stay put. Several of his neighbors had to sell their homes and move to wherever they could find jobs. The value of houses in the neighborhood dropped as a result, and several houses were bought as rental properties. The renters seemed like nice people, but they didn't stay long enough for Mike and Linda to get to know them. They also didn't have many opportunities to meet their new neighbors, as the core of families who used to organize block parties and other neighborhood social functions had left. And now that the kids were grown up, they no longer had the "kids network" to bring them together with other parents in the neighborhood.

As the years went by, the rental houses weren't kept up as well as the houses that were occupied by their owners. Renters moved more frequently, and more houses became rental units. The big Sears store in the nearby shopping center closed. Its space was briefly taken over by a Discount Furniture Warehouse, which gave way to the Benson Heights Antique Mall, which then became a Goodwill warehouse store. Other stores closed as well. Last to go was the giant Food Mart supermarket. A few convenience stores within walking distance of the neighborhood sold prepackaged food at exorbitant prices, but after the Food Mart closed it required a twenty minute drive to get to a real grocery store. Mike could still drive, so he made that trip once a week to stock up on groceries. A few of his neighbors, the "old guard" whom he knew from before the plant closed, no longer drove. Mike sometimes took them with him on these provision runs, or he got a list and did their shopping for them.

For a long time Mike didn't really notice the decline in the neighborhood. For one thing, it happened gradually. Also, Linda died shortly before the Sears closed, and Mike stopped taking his evening walk around the neighborhood. It just didn't seem the same without Linda beside him. His first hint that he no longer lived in the same kind of neighborhood that his kids had grown up in occurred when the police raided a nearby house. Mike was awakened by shouting around 2:00 a.m., and he saw blue police lights shining through his bedroom blinds and dancing across the ceiling. The next day he read in the paper that they had raided something called a

“meth lab” in a neighbor’s basement. After that he started paying more attention to the police blotter section of the paper, and he was shocked to read how many break-ins occurred in and around his neighborhood. There was one instance where an intruder broke into the house of an elderly woman and stabbed her to death before methodically removing everything of value from the house. In another break-in the homeowner shot and killed an intruder. Apparently there was an accomplice, because someone fired one shot at the homeowner before fleeing the house. Fortunately, he missed. The intruder was still at large.

The incident that convinced Mike to get a gun was when someone broke into his garage and stole all his tools. He slept through the burglary and didn’t even know he’d been robbed until the next morning, when he opened the garage door to get his lawn mower. The policeman who investigated seemed almost bored by the intrusion. He didn’t dust for fingerprints, look for DNA evidence, or even take pictures of the jimmed lock on the side door to the garage. He just filled out some paperwork and told Mike to call him if any of the missing tools turned up. Until then Mike had never bothered to lock the door between the garage and the kitchen, and the knowledge that a criminal had been in his garage with free access to the rest of the house made it impossible for Mike to sleep that night. The next morning he drove to a gun store.

The owner of the store was very helpful. He agreed it was a shame that law abiding citizens needed to arm themselves, but that was the way it was. “When seconds count,” he said, “the police are just minutes away.” Mike had gone hunting with his father when he was growing up, so he was familiar with shotguns, and he learned to handle a rifle in the Army so there was little the store owner had to show him. He settled on a 12 gauge pump shotgun with double-ought buckshot. Definitely enough to ruin an intruder’s day, but not something that would go through walls and endanger his neighbors. The store owner put dots of white paint on the sights so they’d be easier to see at night. As Mike drove home he noticed several of his neighbors had bolted iron grates over their first floor windows. Mike didn’t feel the need to do that, because he had a shotgun. He slept soundly that night, and for many nights that followed.

Then one night Mike suddenly found himself wide awake, with his heart pounding. He looked at the clock. Nearly two a.m. What caused him to wake so suddenly, and why was he terrified? He was always one to wake gradually. Sometimes in the morning he could barely remember getting up to pee in the middle of the night, as he’d remained half-asleep through the whole operation. But now he was definitely awake.

He listened intently. All he heard was the “swish – swish – swish” sound of the blood rushing through his ears. Damn! He wished his heart would stop pounding. It was enough to wake the neighborhood. Was that a creak? And another one? Maybe. It was very faint, but it seemed to come from the window. As if someone were trying to lift it open but the lock was

holding it shut. A long period of silence. Then the unmistakable crunching sound of someone just outside his window, walking through the crusty January snow. It sounded like they were headed for his front door.

As quietly as possible, Mike grabbed his shotgun and crept toward the living room. When he got to the end of the hallway he slipped down to the floor to peer around the corner. He'd learned that trick in the Army. People are less likely to notice movement down low. The corner streetlamp put out just enough light that he could occasionally see a silhouette through the small, decorative glass panels in the front door. Someone seemed to be bending over by the latch, and occasionally straightening up to look at something in the streetlight. He could hear a metallic scraping noise. Someone was scratching at the lock.

Mike quickly surveyed his living room to find the best defensive position. Behind the couch seemed like the best bet. The couch wouldn't provide much protection against bullets, but it would hide his body. If he lay down behind it, he could keep out of sight but have a clear shot at the entryway. The couch was in the shadows, while the streetlight shining through the windows would let him see the intruder. He crawled on his belly and took up his position behind the couch.

He lay behind the couch for what seemed like an eternity. He kept the shotgun pointed at the door, but it was hard to hold it steady because his hands were trembling. His mouth was dry. He could feel his heart pounding, and the "swish-swish" in his ears seemed deafening. The scratching at the latch continued. "Why the hell don't they just break a window, reach in, and unlock the door?" His right hand felt sweaty so he momentarily let go of the gun, wiped his hand on the carpet, then carefully wrapped his hand around the grip with his finger on the trigger. He peered down the length of the gun, centered the front sight on the door, and waited.

Suddenly there was a click as the door unlocked. A dark figure noiselessly slipped inside and closed the door behind him. He faced the room and reached behind his back, as though reaching for a gun.

"Freeze!" Mike shouted. The man at the gun shop had told him not to give any warning, as that just gave intruders to a chance to shoot first. "Once they're inside your house, they're fair game" he said. "Don't give them a chance to shoot back." But when the decision point came, Mike discovered he couldn't shoot a man in cold blood.

The figure stopped reaching, weaved a bit unsteadily, and then called out in a distinctively British voice:

"Bloody hell! Who said that?"

Mike thought he recognized the voice. It sounded like his next door neighbor. One of the "old timers" whom he occasionally drove to the supermarket.

"George?" he called out in surprise.

"No, I'm George" came the reply. "Who the bloody hell are you?" The figure was still weaving unsteadily.

"I'm Mike" he said, standing up. "You're next door neighbor."

"Mike?!" The reply was almost indignant. "What the hell are you doing in my house?"

"You're in my house, George" Mike answered, turning on a light.

George blinked and squinted at the light, as he surveyed the room in confusion. "Well. . . this isn't my house. I thought . . . I was shtertain it was. I jus popped down to the pub for a quick pint. They had real football on the telly. You know, where they kick the ball? Shocker I think you Yanks call it. Anyway, I guess I shtayed a bit too long. Propa . . . Prop. . . Prob-a-blee had a few too many pints, too." He paused for a moment and put one hand on the corner of the entryway to steady himself. "I walked home - - you know it's bloody cold out there? Anyway, when I saw the door was locked, I thought Helen had locked me out. I tried to let myself in quiet like, so she wouldn't know how late - - What's the blunderbuss for?" He stared at the shotgun in Mike's hand.

"I thought you were an intruder" Mike said. "You can't go around breaking into people's houses."

"I di'n't breaking anything" George said indignently. He smiled and held up a collection of bent metal picks. "I jus unlocked the door. A chum at school, father wash a locksmith. Taught me to unlock the back door o' the girl's dorm so me date woul'n't get in trouble when I brought her back late." He reached behind his back, pulled out his wallet, and put the picks in it. "Always keep 'em handy. Jus in case." He swayed again and grabbed the corner to steady himself.

Mike put on boots and an overcoat and walked George to his front door. He noticed that George's front door was identical to his, and the front of the house was similar as well. Or at least, it looked similar in the dark. George was pleased to find that the front door was not locked. Just before he stepped through the door he turned to Mike, gave a drunken smile, put his finger to his lips, and whispered "Don't tell Helen."

Make walked back home. As he locked his door he resolved to buy a deadbolt the next day, and maybe one of those door chains, too. The adrenaline was gone, and he felt exhausted as he climbed back into bed, the shotgun neatly tucked away in its usual spot. Someday he might need it, but he was glad he hadn't needed it tonight.