

BERT'S RACCOON

It happened one April afternoon that Bert Gillen noticed a tail sticking out of the hole near the top of his garage.

His worst fears were soon confirmed - it was a raccoon. Probably a pregnant female looking for a warm dry place to give birth, thought Bert, and the fact that he and Kate had recently become grandparents for the third time almost - almost - convinced him to leave the poor beast alone.

But Bert knew that inviting a raccoon to become part of the family was probably a bad idea, regardless of the nobility of the sentiment. He had no intention of harming the beast, but that was a far cry from setting a place at the dinner table for it (metaphorically speaking, of course), as fleetingly comical an idea as that seemed.

He watched with a mixture of horror and admiration as the raccoon backed out of the hole, adjusted its stance, leaped nimbly to a nearby maple branch, and - after a look in Bert's direction that could only be called insolent - scampered down the trunk to disappear in the nearby shrubbery. Watching the acrobatics, Bert decided that maybe the pregnant female scenario wasn't the correct one, and in his heart he was happier at the thought that his coming campaign would be waged against a wily old male rather than a vulnerable mother-to-be. Wily old male versus wily old male, he thought with a smile - that was Nature at its best. Level playing field and all that. Let the games begin!

It was too late in the day to rig the ladder, so Bert decided to use the remainder of the day to plot strategy. Kate was at the mall, and Bert had already decided not to share too much information with his bride of forty years. He recalled all too painfully the table-pounding hysteria that the Incident of the Pumpkin and the Affair of the Cleaning of the Gutters - to name the two most egregious - continued after lo these many years to evoke among Gillen mother and daughters. The slides, too, were trotted out every so often, sources of yet more laughter at Bert's expense. They could have tried to help me instead of taking pictures, he grumped to himself for the forty-third time, but even he had to admit that some of the slides were pretty funny.

It was painful recollections such as these that made clear to Bert the wisdom of sharing particulars of his raccoon-removal strategy on a "need-to-know" basis. Kate would be leaving early the next morning for a baby shower off-Cape somewhere, and Bert figured to have the Raccoon Problem well under control by the time of her return late in the day.

In reviewing his options, Bert decided that any assistance required could be supplied by Jimmy Bell, his next-door-neighbor, lodge buddy, fishing pal, co-grandfather of Bert's first two (Jimmy Jr. was married to Bert's oldest daughter Sarah). Jimmy had been a successful roofer in his younger days, and still maintained all his roofing

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equipment in tip-top condition against the highly unlikely hope that Jimmy Jr. would one day chuck his \$180,000-per-annum job as a patent attorney to take over the old roofing business. ("The kid may not admit it, but he has asphalt in his blood," was one of Jimmy Senior's favorite one-drink-too-many clichés. He was right - the kid never did admit it.)

The following day dawned bright and chilly, ideal weather in Bert's thinking for the battle of Man and Beast that would of course see Man - personified in Bert Gillen of Dennis MA - as the ultimate victor. Kate and Jen Bell, Jimmy's wife, had already left to participate in the Day of Feminine Festivity, so after his first cup of coffee Bert wandered over to the Bells' back yard where Jimmy was doing something with a flower pot.

Following the ritual exchange of pleasantries and learned commentary about the recent mediocre performance of the Red Sox, Bert got right to the point.

"Jimmy, I've got to deal with a raccoon planning to move into low-income housing, also known as the space above my garage," said Bert. "I spotted him yesterday, good-sized SOB. If he gets in, there will be hell to pay. There's probably all kinds of junk and crud in that space where he can hide, and you know as well as I do that a cornered coon isn't about to make life simple for anybody."

"For sure," said Jimmy. "Remember the one that got into Charlie Collins' mother-in-law's place? The old lady had to move into a motel over on 6A while the pest-control guys chased that coon all over the house." Jimmy laughed. "I remember Charlie saying it was a shame that they had to trap the coon while his mother-in-law was walking around free. He never did care for her too much, and it sure didn't help when the old lady told the motel folks to send the bill for her stay to Charlie. She said he should have been the one chasing the coon instead of going out fishing for two days ..."

"Well, I have no intention of letting the situation get out of hand like that," said Bert with a smug little smile. "I figure that if you'll loan me your thirty-foot ladder, I can get up to the hole and seal it before the coon - or my wife - knows what's happening. I'll go into town and get Danny at the shop to cut me a couple of pieces of sheet metal that I can nail right over that hole. Bang, bang, bang, job done, have a nice life somewhere else Mr. Raccoon. I can paint it later."

Jimmy agreed that it sounded like a pretty good plan, but - as he said later - there was one small detail that hovered annoyingly just outside his consciousness, a detail that didn't hit him until a few hours later when he and Bert had the ladder in place and Bert was ready to ascend to begin the sealing operation.

It hit Jimmy all at once. "Uh .. Bert, what happens if the coon is already inside the hole

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and making himself at home in the crawl-space?”

Bert's surprised look befitted a man who had never thought about the possibility of the thing proposed by Jimmy. For some reason Bert's strategic planning had always involved keeping an outside coon outside rather than the infinitely harder job of getting an inside coon out.

Bert stopped about halfway up the ladder to ponder Jimmy's question. "Jeez, I never thought of that," he admitted. "I sure don't want to seal him in if he's already there."

"You'd have no way of knowing if he was in or out," Jimmy continued.

"You're right. There's no light in that space, no windows or anything - I guess I should have a flashlight I can shine in the hole, huh?"

"That would be a start, yeah," said Jimmy. "And if you see a pair of bright green dots glaring out at you, come back down and we'll go into Lil's for coffee while we create Plan B."

And precisely that concern of Jimmy's came to pass - the coon had indeed returned unobserved into the crawl space. Bert managed to peer cautiously into the hole, and even in the dim light it was immediately evident that the coon was not happy about being disturbed. It's like he belongs there, thought Bert, the nerve of the SOB. But now what?

Right about then Jimmy's coffee suggestion started to make real sense.

Before they started into town, Jimmy appeared to have an idea - the same couldn't be said for Bert - and told Bert he'd meet him at Lil's a.s.a.p. Bert was working on his second corn muffin when an excited Jimmy practically ran in the door. "Here's Plan B," he almost yelled, and thrust two or three stapled pages at Bert. "I downloaded it from the happyquadrupeds.com website. It's guaranteed to remove intruders without hurting them."

Bert read a few lines of text and noted that the accompanying photograph depicted a portable device somewhat resembling a leaf-blower. He returned to the text. "... the gentle suction applied to a closed space by the Remov-a-Critter will work at distances of up to thirty feet on any animal weighing less than twenty pounds. The stainless steel fine-mesh net will prevent the animal from coming too close to the motor or fan blades. The entrapment device (optional on most models) will keep the animal safely enclosed until it can be released."

Bert had to read through the literature twice before he realized what he was reading.

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Jimmy could barely contain his excitement. "It's like a vacuum cleaner, see?" He was using his cinnamon stick as a pointer. "Aim it in the direction of the animal, adjust the suction, and next thing you know, you've got the problem neatly solved. Is that one heck of a Plan B or what?"

Bert had not quite caught the full fervor of Jimmy's enthusiasm about the Remov-a-Critter. "Uh...yeah, I guess so," he said vaguely, conscious of the fact that he should have had objections, or questions at least, but couldn't come up with anything more specific than "I wonder if it really works..." "There are loads of testimonials and video clips on the website," replied Jimmy. "My guess is that it would at least be worth a try. After all..." "Let me finish that sentence while you drink your coffee," said Bert. "We don't have many options." "Bingo!" gurgled Jimmy.

The tool having been chosen, the problem now arose of where to rent one, and again the Kindness to Animals website was a big help. Jimmy sat at the computer maneuvering mouse and keys with blinding speed while Bert looked on, conscious of the passage of time and the eventual return of the wives. But it seemed there should still be good four or five hours left in which to find a gizmo, read the owner's manual, climb the ladder, and resume the raccoon hunt. All going well, the garage should be a Raccoon-Free Zone well before Mesdames Gillen and Bell returned.

Bert's meditations were interrupted by a triumphal yelp from Jimmy. "Terrific! There's a rental place over in Mashpee that has a couple of these machines ... let's see if there's one available." Click, click, click, and another yelp. "They have one left and I just reserved it," said Jimmy breathlessly. "Now let's get out of here. We'll take your pickup in case we need the space."

The trip to Mashpee, the rental procedure, and the trip back were all accomplished with surprising dispatch, as Bert noted after a glance at his watch. Still plenty of time, and even better, a message from Kate had miraculously appeared on the answering machine: a delay of some kind, mother-to-be, car trouble, blah blah blah, yadda yadda yadda...But the details weren't required - he'd hear all about whatever it was from Kate at breakfast next day. For Bert at that point in space and time, the operative word of golden sound was "delay".

For the record, however, it should be pointed out that Kate's message was actually to the effect that it was the mother-to-be who had been delayed by car trouble, that the girls had decided as a result to postpone the shower, and that as a further result Kate and Jen Bell would be home earlier than anticipated. The chilling details were all on the answering machine, but an anxious Bert heard none of them past the word "delay", the word which at that moment was the one he most wanted to hear. Had he actually listened to the message...but it's all speculation after that.

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The operation of the Remov-a-Critter seemed simplicity itself. It had an electric motor, and both households were equipped with a plethora of extension cords; the instructions were fairly clear and printed in English, Spanish, and some Oriental alphabet that neither protagonist recognized; operation was basically “turn on motor, aim at animal, push activator, stand by to push ‘trap door close’ button”.

“Couldn’t be easier,” said Jimmy. “Just remember to detach the trap and lower it down to me as soon as your friend is inside. You’ve got the pulley up there ready to go, and I have a nice stout hook spliced to the end of fifty feet of quarter-inch poly over in the garage. We’ll get it rigged and ready in two minutes. There’s certainly no sense trying to climb down a ladder with twenty pounds of indignant raccoon in your arms when you can just lower the trap to me.”

“Good to know that the pulley I put up there ten years ago will finally come in handy,” said Bert. “I didn’t exactly expect it to be for this purpose, but what the heck!” “Exactemundo!” replied Jimmy, and the two pals exchanged their version of a high five.

The machine was ungainly but surprisingly light in weight, and Bert figured he could easily handle machine and flashlight if he were freed from the additional necessity of hanging on to the ladder. Jimmy, retired roofer par excellence, knew just the rig to accomplish this, and pretty soon Bert was moving confidently up towards the hole wearing Jimmy’s best safety harness, which would be attached to a couple of hooks on the garage wall that Jimmy himself had installed a month or so earlier as part of a reshingling job. Once Bert was comfortably in position (more or less), Jimmy would take care of getting the Remov-a-Critter and the flashlight up to him. Once the gear was checked, the short, sweet relocation operation could commence.

Properly attaching the safety harness might have been easy for Jimmy, who had been doing it for thirty years, but it took Bert longer than he expected. Eventually however he announced that he was in position. Jimmy unfastened the rope from its cleat, the pulley squeaked its happy little song, and the hoisted gear arrived without mishap. When tested, the Remova-a-Critter worked perfectly. So far, so good, thought Bert.

The flashlight, however, chose exactly the wrong time to suffer a bout of battery weakness. Bert sent it back down and a few precious minutes were lost while Jimmy rummaged around in his workshop for a functioning pair of D’s.

After what seemed to Bert like an hour and a half, the restored flashlight was hoisted back up to him. Bert moved its beam cautiously around the crawl-space: contact! The bright green eyes were very close to where they had been that morning. As earlier, they

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were not happy little green eyes. Bert hoped his prey could sense the steely determination in his own eyes - he actually squinted, like John Wayne facing down a bad guy.

His hand slipped down to his revolver ... no, wait a minute - I'm getting carried away here, thought Bert as he switched on the machine's motor. It purred purposefully as Bert cautiously brought the nozzle towards the hole. The little red eyes never moved as Bert aimed the nozzle at them and pressed the activation button.

Jimmy, waiting with mounting excitement at the bottom of the ladder, heard an obscenity from Bert, then another. "What's up?" Jimmy yelled. He was aware that Bert seemed to be waving the nozzle of the machine around vigorously inside the hole, but he couldn't figure out why.

Finally Bert stopped swearing long enough to turn off the machine. "The SOB is hiding behind a pile of old magazines," he sputtered to Jimmy. "I forgot they were there. Mr. Coon is watching me and probably laughing as I suck one National Geographic after another into the net at the end of this gizmo. He thinks the machine is going to jam, but it won't." Bert turned to poke the flashlight around in the hole. "The good thing is that he's in a corner," he reported to Jimmy. "Once the magazines are cleared out, I have a straight shot at him ..."

The machine started purring again. Soon a yellow missile flew out the hole, followed by another that knocked Bert's Red Sox cap off, and Jimmy now had two 1970-era National Geographics lying at his feet. He was amused to note that the magazine closest to him featured an article about big-game hunting.

Bert had switched off the machine's suction activator in order to shake a few more magazines off the net down to the ground. Jimmy picked one up. "Where are all the other ones?" he inquired. "There's a big pile inside right under the hole," Bert replied. "They won't be in the way any more. So right now it's looking great for us and not so good for Mr. Coon."

Within a few seconds Bert had resumed the hunt. Jimmy could hear little yelps and cries and the occasional bleep. He also noticed that the motor seemed to be laboring a little. Suddenly there were more obscenities from on high.

"Now what?" cried Jimmy. "The SOB is fighting me," Bert shouted back. "There are no more magazines, I'm pointing this thing right at him, he's got nowhere else to go, but he's got his claws dug in somewhere and the stubborn bleep isn't moving. He's making some kind of snarly noises too...jeez, he's a tough one, no doubt about it."

"Let me see if there's anything in the owner's manual that could help," Jimmy

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suggested. "Hurry it up," yelled Bert. "We haven't got much time."

Suddenly there was a silence in the world, unexplained but palpable. The machine seemed to have shut itself off, and when Bert tried to turn the motor back on, nothing happened. "What the heck ...?" Again, and yet again, nothing. Jimmy checked the extension cords, then ran into the house and back outside. "Power failure," he shouted. "Nothing's working." More obscenities from the top of the ladder, and a strange high-pitched sound from inside the crawl-space. If raccoons could laugh, they'd sound like that, thought Jimmy. "Shut the bleep up, you smelly little bleep," screamed Bert into the hole, then desperately to Jimmy, "Now what do we do?"

"Keep quiet for a minute." Jimmy was in the pickup listening to the radio. "Oh God ..." Bert was beside himself. "What? WHAT?" "A big transformer just blew down in Cummaquid somewhere," reported Jimmy. "This whole end of the Cape is out. N-star has crews enroute to the scene but no idea yet as to when things will be back to normal."

"Well, I can't stay up here forever," said Bert in a small petulant voice that surprised Jimmy. "Help me get this gear down and we'll start over again when the power's back on..."

"Maybe your friend in there will decide to leave on his own," said Jimmy helpfully. "Yeah, right," said Bert with a snort. "As my Brooklyn cousin says, 'I should be so lucky!'" "Did I just hear that chattering noise from the crawl-space again?" asked Jimmy. "Yes, you did," said Bert, jerking his thumb contemptuously in the direction of the hole. "The flea-bitten bleep thinks this whole mess in very funny." Bert's next two syllables were directed at the hole, and we will leave the content of this brief communication to the reader's imagination.

We will draw the curtain over the scene as the friends part to await developments. The local time is 12:39 EDT.

Three hours and twenty-three minutes later, power is restored to a relieved Lower Cape. Let us catch up on what has transpired in the meantime:

During the outage, the two heroes of our little tale have retired to their respective hearths, agreeing to meet at 3 p.m. in Jimmy's kitchen to discuss further strategy. Jimmy has proposed that they take the opportunity to delve more deeply into the Remov-a-critter's owner's manual, in the course of which delving they have discovered the existence of a tiny appendage which they had previously overlooked, a small switch that when in the ON position would effectively double the intake power of the

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machine. There are warnings (in the usual three languages) and ominous-looking icons whose purpose is to make clear the fact that the hyper-switch - whatever its real name - is nothing to take lightly.

As they continue reading, an unpleasant smile grows broader on Bert's face. "NOW we'll get that SOB!" he cries triumphantly. "I'll teach him to laugh at me!" "Back to the woods where he belongs," agrees Jimmy. "It should be smooth sailing as long as the power doesn't go out again. Hey, how about some coffee? I think the stuff in the carafe should still be hot." "Good idea," replies Bert, "and I could probably find a home for one of those doughnuts if it was offered to me. I'm starving. Jeez, we never had lunch today, did we?"

A flash and a crackle, and suddenly the world is full of nice juicy electricity again.

Bert was soon in place atop the ladder, his movements betraying a certain anxiety as the sun drew ever closer to the western horizon. The drill with the safety harness and the gear was completed with no problem, and Round Two of the match began in earnest. As before, Jimmy awaited further orders at the foot of the ladder.

A quick flashlight reconnaissance by Bert showed the coon in pretty much the same position as before - it appeared to have been asleep. In any case it was curled up with its luxurious tail covering its eyes when Bert's flashlight beam intruded. The eyes opened briefly and closed again. "Tired, are we?" muttered Bert in the direction of the hole. "All the better. Less resistance this time." He began to hum a merry tune.

The events of the next five minutes are pretty much a blur in Bert's mind, and the details would have been lost forever but for the presence of Jimmy, who recounted those events many times in the days and years afterwards. Best perhaps to let Jimmy take over from this point:

"So Bert turns on the Remova-a-Critter, low power at first, and now he's got the machine in one hand and the flashlight in the other like before. I hear him swearing and it's pretty obvious that the coon isn't coming out on low power. 'I'm going into hyper-drive,' he yells down at me, and naturally I told him to be careful. If only I had known ...

"He throws the hyper-switch and next thing all Hell breaks loose. The machine lets out a roar like a 747 taking off, and next thing I hear Bert yelling ... actually it was closer to screaming. 'I got him! I got him!' he kept shouting. Then more swearing, and I got the idea from the words in between the cusswords that the trap closing mechanism was

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jammed. He loses his grip on the flashlight and it bounces down the ladder nearly onto my head. 'I've got the bleep - I won't need that thing anymore!' he yells down to me.

But he keeps having trouble with the trap mechanism. "I can't get this bleepity-bleep thing to work!" he calls down. 'Maybe it would be better to get the coon out of the hole now while everything's still working,' I yell back. 'If we lose power again and you drop him back inside, I guarantee you'll never get him out again.' 'Yeah, good idea,' Bert says, and he starts to work the coon - who not surprisingly is extremely agitated by all this - out of the hole. The suction from the machine is holding the coon pretty tight against the nozzle, but the old SOB is scratching and clawing with all his might to get free. He was like a demon. You'd never think anything that cute under normal circumstances could turn out to have such a foul temper.

"Somehow Bert manages to get the coon outside the hole, but in the course of the battle the ladder gets kicked over. Bert nearly had a kitten. The safety harness is doing its job but at that point Bert is pretty much dangling about twenty-five feet off the ground, yelling at me to get the goddam ladder back up to him. The machine is still doing its thing and the coon is still struggling and spitting and making ugly noises you could hear over the sound of the machine and Bert's yelling. I could see why the trap wouldn't close completely - the coon's tail was in the way, and every time the trap tried to close, it gave that poor old tail another squeeze. No wonder the coon was so upset! There was one time Bert got too close to him and that blasted beast nearly scalped him. Thank God he got Bert on top of the head and not on the face. But it sure wasn't for lack of trying.

"I'm not sure why what happened next actually happened, but my guess is that while Bert was fiddling with the trap door control, he accidentally hit some other switch on the Remova-a-Critter that we didn't know about. Anyway there was a godawful screech from the machine that even shut the coon up for a couple of seconds. A lot of smoke too. Then I heard Bert yell something about 'reverse', and the smoke cleared just in time for me to watch the coon get launched fifty feet into the air. It was unreal - it was as if I were experiencing the whole scene in slow-motion: Bert yelling like a lunatic and dangling from the garage clutching the machine; the coon, with its paws and tail sticking out like a flying squirrel's, describing a neat parabola through the air down Bert's driveway ...

"And finally, the coon going splat into the windshield of Kate's car just as it turned into the driveway."

As the late Rod Serling might have said, let us freeze Time. Picture if you will this tableau in your mind's eye:

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Kate and Jen have leaped screaming from the car as the stunned but well-padded and otherwise undamaged coon stands on the hood waving paws in every direction, chattering furiously and ready to shed the blood of any human who thinks his flying lesson was funny. Beau and Sam, the Bells' two Labradors, are on the runner on the other side of the house thinking the worst and barking their heads off, and naturally every dog within two miles of the house has to join in. Three crows are sitting on top of the garage cawing (laughing?) their little black hearts out. Billy Henderson's two elderly beagles - who haven't so much as barked since the last year of the Clinton administration - are baying away in their best memories-of-a-fox-hunt style. Meanwhile Jimmy has run at top speed down the driveway to assist the women, momentarily forgetting his friend dangling from the garage and said friend's urgent need for the fallen ladder. Jimmy is armed with a grandchild's wiffle bat in case the raccoon decides to act out its (justifiable) aggressions. The pendant Bert has of course seen and heard everything and has watched in horror the coon's graceful flight and unceremonious landing. Oddly enough, he has fallen silent; in his shock at seeing the not-sufficiently-delayed Kate, he has actually forgotten to scream at Jimmy to get the blankety-blank ladder back up him.

End of tableau.

The belligerent coon delivered one last blast of 100% Unadulterated Coon Rage before finally shuffling off the car hood in the direction of the magnolias. Jimmy was hugely relieved; the prospect of using a wiffle bat to whack the bejayzus out of an angry raccoon was not one he had faced with much enthusiasm.

The women were over their hysteria, but just barely. Fearing the reappearance of the Demon Raccoon, Jimmy got them back in the car for the short trip up the driveway, maneuvering as close as he could get to the side door of the house so that the women could get quickly inside. As they were in the process of doing so, Jimmy realized with a gasp that in all the chaos, he had forgotten to tell them about Bert.

The screams from the direction of the garage stopped both women in their tracks. "Was that Bert?" asked Kate, at the same time that Jen was saying "I could have sworn I heard a scream." "It's Bert, he's fine, he's fine," Jimmy blurted out. "If he's fine, why is he screaming?" asked Kate. A reasonable question, thought Jimmy, and as he struggled for an answer that would satisfy them, the women headed off in the direction of the garage. They both spotted Bert - dangling all forlorn in his safety harness - at the same time. Neither said a word, and Jimmy was flabbergasted when Kate rushed back in the direction of the car and Jen took off on a trot towards their own house. Now what? he wondered.

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Q: What was Bert observing at that moment?

A: He observed - with ever-more-deeply-chilling blood - his wife reach into the car.

Q: For what purpose did she reach into the car?

A: To get her camera.

Q: And what did Bert begin to hear that he most wanted not to hear?

A: Human laughter. Lots of it.

Tableau Number Two:

Jimmy is struggling to get the heavy ladder back up against the garage as Kate merrily snaps picture after picture. Bert continues to dangle and has resumed yelling. Jen is nowhere to be seen.

“Jimmy, are you sure he’s okay up there?” asked Kate. She had stopped her picture-taking just long enough to change film. “I mean, with just that safety-belt thingy holding him?” “He’s fine,” replied Jimmy. “I used it myself a few days ago, and I outweigh him by twenty pounds. I sank those hooks eight inches into the beam. That rig would support an elephant.”

Kate seemed satisfied but to Bert - who was too high up to hear the conversation - she appeared curiously unconcerned about getting him down. And why in cripe’s name had Jimmy decided at that very moment to check the tire pressure on the bicycle he hadn’t ridden in four years? Why wasn’t he doing anything with the ladder? Bert was hoarse from all the screaming and yelling he had already done; all he could do was make gestures and squeaky noises. Like that goddam coon, he thought, and shuddered.

Close to Heaven as he was, Bert tried his hardest not to hate anybody, human or raccoon. He tried his hardest not to want to kill Jimmy with his bare hands for not getting the ladder back up to him. But he tried his very very hardest not to think about how badly he had to use the toilet.

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Kate's voice - when it was at last directed towards him- was certainly welcome. "Hi honey!" she called up to him cheerfully. "Don't you worry - we'll get the ladder up to you very soon - just have to wait until Jen gets her camera. She doesn't want to miss anything like this. Jimmy says you don't have anything to be concerned about. Just try not to move around a lot or ..." "Or I'll screw up the pictures?" whispered Bert. Kate chose to ignore the remark, or maybe it was hard to hear twenty-five feet below, or maybe he didn't really say it but just thought it. Reality wasn't what it used to be - maybe it was the altitude.

"Sorry I couldn't manage to get a picture of your raccoon," Kate said with one of her prettiest smiles, and Bert knew then that she had heard his last remark. Loudly and clearly.

Wait a minute - MY raccoon?

And he realized that another chapter of Bert Gillen's Most Ridiculous Exploits was taking shape.

The ladder was repositioned as soon as Jen Bell removed the last of her 37 discs (Bert wasn't really counting - it just seemed that way). He unhooked the safety harness and wearily made his way down, noticing only then that he was still clutching the accursed Remov-a-Critter. He let it drop, and watched without emotion as the impact of the fall finally caused its balky trap to snap shut.

Arriving at last at the bottom of the ladder, Bert had the absurd desire to kneel and kiss the ground in gratitude that the ordeal was over. When he turned around, he realized that he was alone, although he could hear small noises nearby. Not knowing what to expect, he peered around the corner of the garage and was surprised to find the others crouched and shushing one another as they pointed to the shrubbery. Bert looked in the direction of their outstretched fingers, and there it was - a raccoon play-bowing and doing cute things with an apple while the women oohed and ahed and captured the whole performance for posterity. But it wasn't just any raccoon. The obvious kink in the tail told Bert all he needed to know: it was his raccoon, all right, the one whose tail had gotten pounded in the Remov-a-Critter's defective trap door, the one whose claws had drawn Bert's blood and probably left him scarred for life. Yes, it was his raccoon.

Bert looked for a brick or large rock, fortunately found none, experienced some relief in clenching and opening his fists over and over again. Come on, you bastard - make eye contact with me, Bert hissed to what he thought was himself. "Did you say something, dear?" asked Kate, then without waiting for his reply, "Isn't he adorable? And look at him - it's almost as if he's posing for the camera!" The masked buffoon is shameless, thought Bert, and in his mute hatred suddenly recalled with a distinctly sinful pleasure the raccoon tail that had decorated the radio antenna on his Uncle Larry's Studebaker

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many years in the past. That's where you're gonna wind up, you mangy bleep, thought Bert, or maybe he actually said it because Kate turned around as if he had. He pretended to cough.

The coon brought the performance to an end, but not before the bright little black eyes fixed on Bert's. You humiliated me, human, and damaged my tail, but as you see, I have triumphed over you, your friends, your electricity supply, and also your stupid machine which by the way you broke when you dropped it. The repairs will cost you an extra seventy-six dollars. Have a nice bleeping day. And get some hydrogen peroxide on that gouge I put on your bald spot. Never know where my claws have been. One last thing - was that the Uncle Louie who did five years hard time for mail fraud, or the Uncle Louie who had the discount sex-change operation in Manila in 1966? Hah-hah-hah-hah...

Bert heard this; none of the other did. The women were waving goodbye to the coon; even Jimmy seemed charmed. "Cute little guy, isn't he?" he said. "And who'd have thought he'd come back here so soon?"

"You know what I think?" asked Jen, who had grown up in California and dabbled a little in practices like Theosophy and channeling before marrying Jimmy. Bert said nothing; he grimly recalled Jen's attempt to build a Goddess Labyrinth in her back yard and knew what was coming. "I think he came back ... to forgive you, Bert." Her pale blue eyes were moist. "To forgive you. How sweet is that?"

Suddenly Bert remembered. - What the hell did he mean about the electricity supply?

Kate couldn't agree enough as Jen chattered on about the superiority of raccoon spirituality. Jimmy smiled indulgently but glanced at Bert and wisely said nothing. Bert stood rooted in dumb fury, and could only respond with a tight little nod of the head when Kate asked if he was feeling all right. "My HERO!" she suddenly cried, and her kiss on his cheek was the best thing that Bert had felt all day.

Back in the house, the tinkly sound of women's laughter and the occasional guffaw from his alleged lodge brother did nothing to restore Bert's usual lightness of heart. Even Jimmy's "Good job, buddy!" and the Secret Lodge Handclasp of Approval had no effect. It had been a long day.

So Bert sat glumly in the living room feigning an interest in the television while waiting for some semblance of his humanity to return. Meanwhile the others were now gathered around the computer screen in the den to view Jen's pictures, which, alas, had turned out perfectly. Bert had hoped against hope that there would be something wrong with her camera. -There was something wrong with the camera, came an all-too-familiar voice in Bert's head. I repaired it. Now the world can see how cute I am and

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what an utter klutz you are. There was the sound of mocking laughter. Drop dead, you mangy beast, said Bert in a louder voice than he had intended. Then to himself: To hell with my humanity. I just want to have an enormous drink, perhaps several, and go to sleep for a week or a month. With any kind of luck I'll awaken in some distant morning's bright sunshine and find out it was all a weird dream and that there are no such things as telepathic raccoons. And to the raccoon: I hope that scruffy tail of yours hurts like mad for at least six months. Now go back to your garbage-can habitat and leave me and what's left of my self-respect the hell alone.

From the den Kate and Jen heard Bert's muttering and figured it might be time to make a fuss over him, so Jimmy was dispatched into town to get tomato juice and a few limes. Jen might have believed in horoscopes and crystals but somewhere in one of her existences she had learned to make one heck of a Bloody Mary, and Bert allowed himself to be dosed and comforted for about as long as it took Kate to call both daughters with the details. The girls arrived within a few minutes of each other, and the impenetrable cycle of compassion and cruelty began afresh as the females of the tribe gathered in the den to listen to the older women's story and to view the digital evidence. And to laugh, much.

Bert finished Bloody Mary #3, grabbed a couple Ritz crackers off the cheese tray, yelled goodnight without any reply from the giggling group in the den, and went up to seek oblivion. It arrived as soon as his poor clawed head hit the pillow. He had been too exhausted to eat the crackers. As far as he can recall, he did not dream. Of raccoons or anything.

Although everyone in both families had sworn by various deities, grandchildren, and Crystalline Entities never to reveal the afternoon's details to another living soul, Bert took it as a certainty that the tale - suitably embellished - would shortly replace the saga of Charlie Collins' mother-in-law as the chuckle-source for the entire town. He was right, of course, but when it happened, it was worse than he could ever have anticipated. The story spread like wildfire, even beyond the confines of the town. Bert couldn't believe it: the callow youth at the rental place in Mashpee seemed to know all about the incident when Bert and Jimmy went next day to return the machine (yes, it did cost an extra \$76 to cover damages, and Bert didn't want to know how the raccoon knew).

It took about two hours for the regulars in Lil's to know more about what went on than Bert did; rumors were rife that one of the Boston stations was sending a reporter and camera crew down; Patty over at Donut Heaven created a special marble cruller called "Bert's Raccoon" for the occasion (it had an adorable little twisty tail of dark and light dough at one end); a singer at the Tuesday night open mike at Terry's regaled his

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listeners with a musical version of the tale; some local cartoonist was reportedly working on a project that would be featured in a special edition of the local paper, et cetera et cetera.

For a while it seemed to Bert that the affliction would never end. As the story spread beyond the confines of the town, the Gillens began to receive unfriendly calls from people claiming to represent various humane societies and animal rights groups, none of whom seemed interested in hearing Bert's side of the tale or in hearing that it was dangling Bert who was briefly an endangered species and not the raccoon.

It got to the point where the Gillens were on the verge of changing their phone number. Then suddenly, on a moonless night in late April, the good Lord at last let His face shine upon Bert by sending one of His meteorites smack into the middle of the Falmouth landfill. It wasn't a very impressive meteorite - about three pounds by the time it cooled off, and sort of nondescript black-grey in color - but it did an excellent job of moving Bert and his travails into the scrap heap of local history. Everyone on the Cape knew someone whose sister-in-law's third cousin saw the thing land, the papers aren't telling the whole story, CIA coverup, etc. It got very Roswellian for a while and Bert couldn't have been happier.

Nowadays when someone outside the family circle refers to the raccoon incident, Bert pretends that he doesn't recall much about it. Wonderful Kate has saved three or four unimportant news clippings and a few indistinct photos to be trotted out on just such occasions, and has learned to change the subject subtly and imperceptibly to the meteorite, which she manages to make a far more interesting topic than a silly old raccoon. She does it so well that the receiving party never feels a thing:

"I was at the Gillens' last night. Nice couple, you met them at Cathy's wedding last year."

"Oh yeah - the Gillens. Did you ask them about the raccoon? I remember there was some funny story going around ..."

"You're right, but if I did ask about it I don't remember what they said. But did you know that they have a piece of that meteorite that landed in Falmouth? Yeah, really! I don't know how they got it but my brother-in-law's cousin the state cop said he had heard that ..."

Of course the Gillens' infamous "meteorite fragment" is actually a chunk of barbecued cinder block that Kate manufactured in the back yard one afternoon. Regardless of its humble terrestrial ancestry, it looks sufficiently mysterious under the blue light on the top shelf of Grandma Donovan's china closet to keep the meteorite fiction alive. There's an index card with a lot of information propped up in front of the "meteorite"

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but of course the print is so small, no one can read it. And under no circumstances must it be touched. To avoid contamination, of course - nothing personal.

It was all Kate's idea, and Bert's love and admiration for her grows with every new person she foos.

And so the Incredible Tale of Bert's Raccoon has been woven into the rich tapestry of the Gillen family's life, there to remain for the delectation of generations yet unborn. One may note that the Gillen grandkids - there are seven now - enjoy more than the usual number of stuffed raccoons, raccoon puppets, books and videos about raccoons, and so forth.

Not surprisingly, most of these treasures are gifts from Grandpa Bert, and he's happy that everybody likes his way of dealing with the past.

Kate has promised Bert not to get out the photo album again until the grandkids are older. Bert's still not sure where she keeps it.

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