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## Home

Stephen Schoon  
*Cedarville University*

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## *Stephen Schoon*

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### **Home**

The father of two children climbs the next set of stairs in the apartment complex. Sweat has already soaked his undershirt and he fears it will soon show through his white dress shirt. He cannot have this happen. People will not want to listen to him if he smells like a factory worker. He is an insurance salesman going from door to door and he must be presentable, but the poor ventilation in these apartments and the sauna-like stairwells are not very conducive for keeping professional appearances.

He keeps his own schedule and makes his money from commission. He likes it this way. He can provide for his family and let his wife stay at home to raise the children. So many women are leaving the home and entering the workforce these days that it scares him. He wants his children to grow up under ideal conditions, and he can make this happen by the job he has now. He is a good salesman and his profits indicate this. The only reason he is in an apartment complex is the amount of potential business so close together.

He knocks on a door, but no one answers. The hallway he is standing in has a stairwell in the middle: one set of stairs leading up, another leading down. There are five doors spaced evenly on one side, and four on the side of the stairs. He tries knocking again, and again no reply. He is used to this and has developed a habit of thinking about things, namely his family and hobbies, until someone answers the door, instead of standing and wondering if anyone is home. He thinks about how much fun it is playing catch with his son and how enjoyable it is to go to his daughter's piano recitals. Sometimes when he is tying flies for his fly-fishing, his wife will sneak downstairs and surprise him. She knows his hobby well enough to know when it is safe to startle him and when it is not. Most of the time after she scares him he does not finish the fly, but finds other attractions to pursue. His wife does not mind too much. One might think she plans it that way.

He smiles at this thought and knocks on the second door. Again, no answer. One good thing about doing door to door in the suburbs, he thinks, is not only is it close to home, but there is almost always someone at home. Perhaps there are people at home here, but they would rather not answer the door. He can see how people would be like this. When he gets home, he hangs his hat on the rack which sits just inside the small entryway and aims himself toward the

kitchen, hoping his wife has dinner ready. After dinner he plays with his children and perhaps reads a few pages of the newspaper. He does not want any disturbances or interruptions. His home is his domain and he keeps it a relaxing and fun place.

No one answered the doors of the first two in the row of five, so he continues down the line. He decides that after these next three he will go home. It is nearing five o'clock and his stomach anticipating dinner. Walking to the third door he uses his left hand and vents himself by pulling his collar off his neck a little. He has to be careful though, he does not want to off-center his necktie. After a five second repose, he moves his briefcase from one hand to the other and is about to knock when he remembered something. He realizes that he must go back to the second door and either talk with the people there or ensure no one is home. One of his contracts has expired and he needs to pursue the case, but first he must reread it. He leans against the wall and opens his briefcase. When he gets done rereading the contract, he decides, he will go back and knock on the second door.

On the other side of the wall the salesman is leaning against, is a young man. The young man sits quietly at the dinner table, which doubles as a desk, in his small apartment. Slight sounds permeate his window from the street below, but he does not hear them. He does not notice the cloud-mottled sky nor its bright sun. His blinds are drawn and the sun beats fiercely on the table, warming his arms and body. Residual smells of last night's pizza and stale beer float around the room: their smells so subtle yet so poignant, one can almost feel the smell. But the man smells nothing.

He puts an envelope to his nose and it makes bristling noises as it rubs against his unkempt beard. He inhales. The smell of his fiancée's perfume alters his thoughts as the chemicals make their way from his nostrils to his brain. He imagines her in his arms: her long delicate fingers playing with his black hair. After a minute of self-indulging fantasies, he taps the letter on the table, knocking the contents to one end, and tears open the side with the stamp.

The flowing script of her writing weaves his thoughts into tangible feelings. He smiles as he reads it. It speaks of how she misses him, of course, and how his being away at graduate college is excruciating for her because she has to stay where she is for the sake of her employment. He frowns when he reads this. She speaks of how great everything will be once he has his Master's degree and once they are together. He finds himself falling into her fantastic world as she describes it in the letter. He likes this world she has created. After reading her closing comments and noticing how she always dots the "i" in her name with a heart, he opens the card that was sent with it.

A painting depicts the face of the card. It shows an old early nineteenth century picturesque house. It has four white pillars holding up a lean-to roof

which covers a large front porch. The pillars are not very tall, but they are big enough to make the house look respectable, yet not gaudy. A bench swing hangs in the porch patio; on it sit a couple in each other's arms, perhaps swinging. To the left of the couple is the front door. On it hangs a wreath heart, still green. There is a tree in the front yard and its shadow rests on the house, enshrouding the couple in their own make-believe world. Their bliss is barely perceptible on their faces, for the card is not very big, and one can only make out their smiles. The young man smiles at this as it reminds him of how much he loves her.

He opens the card up and on the left side is her script again. It reads: "I'm just not complete without you. I miss you so much and I can't wait to talk to you tomorrow!" His limbs fall numb, and his heart pounds slowly, but strongly; so strongly, in fact, that he can see his shirt vibrate as it beats time after time. He does miss her very much. He then looks to the other side of the card and in a kind of old-English cursive there is a cliché written down: it is a cliché because it is timeless. The saying is this: "Home is where the heart is."

Underneath this print is her script again, it reads: "Your heart is with me, my love. Please come home." The young man knows that he cannot go back; he has three months of school to finish. And she knows he cannot either, but the thought of her longing for him and his desire to see her seems to make their love stronger, so they continue their romantic games until they can finally be together: until he can finally be home.

A knock at the neighbor's door echoes in the hallway and jerks him out of his immersed thought, and he looks toward the window. A loss of thought envelops him. He walks toward the window hoping to remember what it was he had to do. Looking down seven stories toward the street he suddenly remembers what it was. He turns his gaze off of a child and her mother who are walking on the sidewalk below, grabs a roll of quarters, and begins to fill a duffel bag with clothes. If he would have bothered to watch a little longer he would have seen the mother smack the girl then drag her along behind her, crossing the street and rushing into the apartment building.

"But mama," begged the nine-year-old girl as they were walking up the stairs to their apartment, "I don't wanna go home. I wanna go back to Lori's house!"

A man in a white shirt and tie was standing in the hall. His briefcase was open on the floor and he was reading some papers. The woman ignored him, opened the fourth door, and took her daughter inside, leaving the door ajar. The third door then opened and the student came out with a roll of quarters in one hand and a duffel bag in the other.

"Sir," said the salesman, "May I please have a moment of your time?"

"Sorry, I've got no time. Maybe later, ok?" says the young man as he locks his door.

"Yes, thank you. I will stop by tomorrow. Will you be home tomorrow?"

"No. I won't be home for another three months," said the young man as he walked downstairs.

"For the last time, be quiet!" the girl's mother yells as she slaps her child again.

The salesman standing in the hallway heard the violence, chose to end his day, and go home. He was tempted to close the door to the screaming woman's apartment as he left, but decided not to. Instead, he left her to her rushed explanations and threats. As he walked down the stairs, a backward glance showed the small girl cringing slightly as her mother scolded her.

If the girl's mother is late for her hair appointment and has to reschedule, her daughter will pay for it when she gets back home, she says. The idea that her husband had left her with the child and decided that France and French women are much better than anything this place has to offer chafes her beyond what she can express. So she is forced to find other ways to express her anger toward her ex-husband.

Sometimes the girl's friends at school ask her why she had a black eye, and then make fun of her and say she got beat up by a first-grader. She never tells anyone the truth and when her teachers ask, she lies. She tells them that she fell or that she hurt herself while playing. She tells them things they know are lies, which they have heard too many times before, and which they can do nothing about.

There are a million places she would rather be than at home, at least this is what she thinks to herself every day on the bus. The only place she hates worse than home is school. And she hates school more because she has to deal with home and school at school. She does not have to deal with school and home at home, though. Her mother cares little what her child does at school so long as she does not get into trouble and does not complicate the social life her mother has spent more time in developing than she has spent with her daughter.

Methodically, the girl indicates she does not want to go home, but would rather be somewhere else, and methodically, her mother slaps her. Her mother looks at the clock, stops her berating in mid-sentence, and locking the door behind her, runs back down stairs to catch a cab for her appointment.

It is not so bad being at home when mother is not there, the child thought. But she has to be very careful, nonetheless. If anything is misplaced, spilled, or broken, the children at school would be making fun of her the next day. She had gotten used to the beatings, but it still hurt her to be defamed by her own peers. She looks around at the neatly kept apartment. The white plush carpet still shows a tinge of her spilled Kool-Aide from a few months ago, and near that stain are a few other dotted stains, also made by her, but not because of her. The shades are opened and the lights are off, but it does not matter. Nothing matters. She cannot

chance making a mistake so she goes into her bedroom and plays with her dolls. She only has two dolls, and she takes very good care of them. She received them as a gift from her father four years ago and she cherishes them as if they were from a god.

She takes the dolls out of her dresser drawer and pretends they go to the zoo. They see tigers and lions. They even see big snakes. Then they go to Disney World and ride all the rides and see all the attractions. The girl is not sure what rides or attractions there are, but she is pretending, so it does not matter. She never plays house with her dolls. She does not want her dolls to be in a place that they hate as much as she does.

Her mother slowly climbs the stairs, for the sake of her newly-fashioned hair, to her apartment. As she reaches the top, she sees an old woman fumbling with her door key. If she had stopped to see the old woman open the door, she could have caught a glimpse of the past four decades represented by decorations hanging from every corner and square inch of wall, but instead she unlocks her door and strides inside, slamming the door behind her.

As poor as her hearing is, the old woman is startled by the slamming door. She turns around and looks in the direction of the noise. She sees no one, but does hear faint screaming and yelling with intermittent thuds. Shrugging her shoulders and commenting to herself how bad the world has gotten in the past thirty years, she walks through the already-opened doorway and inside. The door closes and underneath the knocker, taped to the wood, is a small sign. It looks flimsy, as if it were cut out of a magazine. Simple block letters on a textured background read, "God Bless You," and underneath this line, in a smaller font, is "John 3:16."

On the other side of the solid wooden door, the old woman is trying to find a comfortable position on her couch, and as she does so, the afghan hanging over the back of the couch slowly inches down and in between the cushions. The television is already on and tuned to her favorite station. As she sits and watches, her old mind wanders from the show into the past. She stares at the walls, but does not notice the pictures of herself as a young woman, or the pictures of her late husband. She does not see the spider plant in the corner, reaching, with gravity's blessing, toward the ground, nor the myriad paintings of farm life which encompass her.

Knick-knacks and garage sale items clutter the room and cover every available surface: something tangible to fill her life. She knows her soul belongs to God and that He is in control of everything. He keeps her joyous and content, but she still has a deep longing for her husband. This is what she is thinking about. She remembers riding with him as he drove himself to the hospital with strange feelings in his chest and right side. By the time they reached the emergency room he could only move the fingers on his left hand and he walked with

an exaggerated limp. She wishes he could have had that stroke later because they have better medicine for that now. He might have lived. But he did not live and she was forced to continue life without her best friend.

For over ten years she has been doing that. The Bible studies, church organizations, and all her friends at church help her immensely and she is very grateful for them and their willingness to comfort an old lady. They come over and visit her and she makes them cookies and gives them milk. Though cookies and milk were a favorite when she was growing up, apparently they have lost their magic. Children enjoy them, but not as much as they used to. She liked things the way they were: especially her old home.

As a child, and until she was old enough to be a grandmother, she had lived on a farm. First as a daughter on her father's farm, then as a wife on her husband's. Farm life is not her life anymore, though, and the old farm is no longer her home. When her husband died from his stroke, from working too hard in weather too hot, she had to sell the farm and move to some place simple. A place where everything would be taken care of for her, because that is what her husband did. Moving in with children was not an option, for she had been unable to bear children. She does not have any siblings either and her parents passed away long ago. So she lives alone. She does have God to keep her and an occasional friend stops by, but as a general observation one would say she is a lonely old woman, waiting for death to set her free.

And that is exactly what she is waiting for. She has nothing holding her down, nothing keeping her anywhere, not even alive. She prays every day that God would do what He wants with her life. She will stay and live, if this is what He wants, but she still asks that if it is at all possible, that she would be 'sent home to be with the Lord.' Her favorite song is a hymn. The lyrics read: "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through, my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world any more."

She begins to hum the tune, but is startled by a harsh knock at the door. Slowly rising she notices the afghan out of place and lays it over the back of the couch. The man on the other side of the door can hear the latch click open and the chain slide out of its cage. The door opens and the old lady greets him.

"The superintendent sent me to fix your shower head." says the man from maintenance as he looks at the grey-haired woman.

"Oh, how very nice. Won't you come in? The bathroom is right over there," she directs with an outstretched finger. "Would like some cookies and milk while you're here?"

"Hmmm?' Oh. No thank you, ma'am. I'm not supposed to eat unless I'm on break." He pauses for a moment to look around the room. "This is a very nice home you live in."



“Oh, this isn’t my home. It’s just where I live. My real home is in heaven with Jesus.” This thought warms her and she smiles. The smile is already carved into her face from years of laughing and the creases in her cheeks relax as her smile falls. Then, as if picking up the conversation right after he mentioned he was not allowed to eat while working, she says, “Really? No food on the job, eh? Boy, they sure are getting strict these days. I used to live on a farm and....”

The man subtly interrupts the woman as she gathers her thoughts, “I’ll get to work on this for you so I can get out of your hair.” He quickly left toward the bathroom before she could detain him any longer, and closed the door behind him, locking it.

There is nothing exceptional about this middle-aged man: average height, no distinguishing characteristics. He is the type of guy one works with in a large office for over two years, and no one notices him until he introduces himself formally. Strangely enough, he did work in a large office for just less than two years and no one took special notice of him. That was three years ago. He did not know what his title was, but he did know what he was paid to do: enter data. He guesses he could have been called a Data-Entry Person, but it does not matter. He became bored with that job and quit, just like he had the plethora of jobs before that one.

He’s not a nomad, to speak of, but he is a wanderer. He might be labeled a bohemian, but he lacks the artistic and intellectual lifestyle. He does have a family, though his connections with them are disintegrating more and more as each Christmas passes. He enjoys his life of relative solitude and his sense of freedom. Now he is a handyman working in an apartment complex.

He has been at this job for eight months. The time between his data-entry job and this maintenance job was filled with travel from three states east to where he is now. He stopped in three cities and worked a weekend in each. Twice as a dishwasher and once as a clean-up man at a construction site. He worked until he had enough money to live for a week and for gas, then moved on. When he arrived in the city, he customarily bought a newspaper, opened it to the help wanted ads and chose his next job. He was working as a handyman in this apartment complex two days later.

Thoughts like these rebound in his head and he considers them briefly. The old woman said the shower head was leaking. That is not a very accurate or descriptive symptom, so he turns the water on. Half the water shot lazily from the small holes in the head, and the other half poured from the bottom of the seam between the plastic head and the metal nozzle. Smiling, the man turned off the water and twisted the shower head so it was snug against the nozzle, then turned the water back on. It worked. To ensure it did not easily loosen again, he unscrewed it, dried it, and put some silicone sealant on the threads then tightened

it back on.

His day was nearing its end and he considered his plans for the night. Nothing. Perhaps he would read. Yes, he would read. And he would go out and buy a newspaper. He has exploited all the practical uses of the handyman job and he is ready to move on. He wants to stay in the city a while longer, but he knows soon he will be gone. Probably within a year. He has done office work, mechanical work, manual labor, heavy machinery work, and has even been a cook, but this current employment is boring him faster than the rest.

He has always wanted to live in Maine. Perhaps he will move there and become a Lobsterman. Yes, he decides, that is what he will do. He will find another job within the next two weeks and work there until next summer. Then he will move to Maine. He would like to have a home in Maine, but for now home is here in a basement room of the apartment complex.

Opening the bathroom door, the man sees the old lady sitting on the couch watching television. "It's all fixed. Have a nice evening," he says as he walks toward the door, but she does not answer. Thinking this strange, he turns from the door and looks at her. She appears to be dead, so he takes four steps to her and puts his first two fingers on her neck. She is dead.

He picks up the phone and calls the police and within three minutes there are policemen and paramedics crowding the small apartment. He gives a statement and the paramedics pronounce her dead from natural causes: most likely a heart attack. He then leaves the stifling room and descends the stairs.

At the landing a child, who is playing with his action figures, stops him with a question, "What's going on up there, mister?"

The little boy's innocent eyes warn him of relating the brutal truth, so he explains it nicely, "Well, an old woman just went home to be with Jesus." He did not want to pursue a cluster of 'whys' so he quickly pats him on the head and descends the back stairs into the basement.

The little boy's second question echoed in the stairwell, and went unanswered, "Where is home?"