

# A LONG, LOW CHATTER

Robert Helfst

I've lived in the same farmhouse my whole life. I know its creaks and faults better than I know myself. I raised and lost a family here. Hopefully I'll die here too.

At night, the chatter of my corn fields crowds in close to this empty house and tries to force its way in.

Ten years ago the field didn't seem so close. Ten years ago the house wasn't so empty.

Back then the skies opened up and poured sheets of rain for weeks. I spent more time pulling tractors and wagons out of mud than I did actually working the fields. But it was as if God had reached down and commanded the fields to grow tall and full. Normally I'd look for my fields to be "knee high by the fourth of July," but by the end of that summer the corn was over nine feet tall and fat ears fell from the stalks if you didn't step carefully through the furrows.

Owen was eight that summer and he flourished as well. It was as if a switch had been thrown — gone was his childish talk and need for cartoons and toys, replaced by serious questions about the working of the world and time spent with me in the fields. He took delight in plumbng the soil to check its fertilization, laughed at the jumping ears of corn. We toiled side by side, pulling weeds and checking our small vegetable garden. His whining quit quickly, as we spent those long summer days sweating, hands in the dirt, breathing in the lovely air while the corn chattered laughter at us from nearby.

Even though my back ached for the soft give of my recliner, we spent the evenings playing catch. At that age, I could tell that Owen was destined for Hoosier baseball greatness. He had an arm on him, enough to sting my

hand at times. My boy had mastered how to shield the setting sun with his free hand to catch fly balls, how to cup it in the glove so there were no dropped outs. As long as I raised him up right, kept him safe from the world, he'd be making a trip to Bloomington to pitch.

One evening, while passing the mud-stained ball around the barn lot, my field caught my attention. The stalks were always our night music, the soft stutter of their leaves scraping against each other a swaying rhythm to our games of catch. But I heard an aggressive chatter at my back.

"Owen. Get inside." I squinted — the setting sun's angles of light didn't reach deep enough but I could hear the chatter. My dusk to dawn light buzzed and my veins thrummed.

"What is it, dad?"

"Get my flashlight." We moved to the mud room at the backdoor. I grabbed my shotgun, pulled a few shells from the top shelf. Owen hoisted the black spotlight.

"Can I help?"

I paused. I figured it was some raccoons heading for our trash can or eating off those drying ears. "Spotlight the rows and keep behind me."

When we stepped outside the chatter had gotten louder. The rows of corn shook as if something was running through the furrows, shaking them into a wild dance. The spotlight trembled, Owen trying to trace it back and forth. Wild shadows rose against the rest of the field.

"Keep it steady, son." I slid a shell into place. What sort of animal could move like that? The coyotes had always kept to themselves, only peering in at the edge of the field to take off when I noticed them. But the movement of the corn had to be caused by something — the air was the dead blanket of a summer night.

"What is it, daddy?" Owen's voice had fallen back to childlike. The wide yellow beam darted from corner to corner of the field, but no shapes emerged from the wild shadows.

"Cover your ears." I glanced back to see him set the flashlight down. I fired one shot into the sky. The stalks continued to shake but there was no sign of flight from any animals, no darting shadows away. The chatter increased. I ejected the spent shell, slid in another.

The air refused to still. I shouted, but no echo bounced through the field of noise. Our nearest neighbor was miles away, another small farm adrift in an ocean of fields.

A shadow reached across my yard, its liquid black darting towards my son on the patio. He screamed, little hands still covering his ears, but couldn't look away. I remembered how young eight years is.

I fired into the corn as Jess ran onto the patio. Stalks fell and the shadow faded into the night. Owen sobbed.

"Jesus, hon, what was it?" She cradled our son, wiped away his tears. I could smell the corn steaming for dinner and my stomach turned.

"Not sure. Coyotes, maybe." I glanced back to the now silent fields.

Owen was quiet, eyes wide, staring out at the night. "Can we go inside now?"

I didn't touch the corn at dinner.

**A**fter that night, I started staring out the windows at the emptiness of my land. No matter the weather my fields seemed to build their stalks into a long, low chatter, whether or not they were buffeted by the wind. I'd lean back in my easy chair, feel its creak accept my weight, and listen as the fields sang their chaotic song to the night.

Owen stayed close to my side. I found him sitting in the dark corners of rooms, holding his hands out to touch the lines of light. His eyes always pulled toward the fields.

My shotgun sat by the back door, but I kept the shells where Owen couldn't reach them. High up on the top shelf in the mud room, tucked behind my winter work gloves and hat. Owen's bat and mitt sat unused beside my worn boots behind the door.

We hadn't thrown the ball since that shadow raced after him. We still worked the garden together, but I'd force him inside the moment shadows started to grow long. When the horizon washed in pastel pinks and burning red he would sit in his room with building blocks until dinner time. I made sure that his light was always on.

She tried not to notice, but Jess pressed me on the issue.

"He was never afraid of the dark before." Her voice was low as she dried the plates I handed to her.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're kidding, right?" She jerked her head at the ceiling. His room was directly above us. "He runs inside by 6 or 7 each night. You've barely played catch."

"He's just worn out. We all are." My back cracked as I turned to her. "He's fine."

"He's not fine. We're not fine. What's going on out there? You're not acting yourself either."

"Just worried that those coyotes are tearing up my fields."

"Coyotes?"

"Yeah, coyotes."

She didn't talk for a long time. Later, after I'd tucked Owen in and laid down in bed, she turned to me.

"If it's just coyotes, why don't you clear them out?" She kissed my cheek and rolled away from me.

Jess's words ran circles in my head while the stalks clacked together. I didn't know what I'd seen, but I thought I could chase it off like any other pest. It made sense, the natural order of things.

She pretended to be asleep when I swung my legs out of bed. The clock said it was 2:15. Every step down the stairs moaned, threatening to betray me. I probed each piece of wood carefully, avoiding the creaking step four from the top and crept into the mudroom.

Outside, the fields were filled with that steady chatter of dried stalks moving against each other. The summer heat wrapped round our home like a veil. Sweat danced across my forehead and stuck my t-shirt and boxers to my body. I slipped into my boots and reached for the shotgun, but thought better of it. Jess and Owen were sleeping soundly. Instead, I grabbed my old Louisville slugger and moved into the night.

For a long while I stood at the edge of the field, a few feet away from the nearest stalks. They thrashed in the sticky heat. A light breeze moved through the night, but not enough to account for this wild movement. I glanced back to my home, saw the silhouette of Owen staring down at me from his brightly lit window. I smiled, unsure if he could see it from the half-light of the moon, and moved through the rows.

It was as if a switch had been thrown. The fields silenced and stilled, save for the highest points of the stalks that swayed gently in the breeze. I breathed deep the loamy scent of growth and abundance tinged with the dry dust of the yellowing plants.

With each step deeper into the field, I tightened my grip around the bat until I couldn't tell whether the creak came from the handle or my knuckles. Ears fell to the ground like hail stones if I wasn't careful with each step.

If you asked me now why I took only that bat, I could rationalize it — my family was asleep, I didn't want

to wake them. At the time though, it wasn't so much a courtesy as it was selfish pride. I wanted to prove myself to Jess, to beat back whatever the hell had taken residence in my field and rushed at my boy.

More importantly, I wanted to beat back the fact that I'd trembled after that inky darkness had slithered back into the field.

The yellowed leaves were like fine sandpaper when they whipped against my cheeks and arms. The fine dust they left behind ground into my pores and filled my body with an itch I hadn't known I was capable of feeling.

I walked the field for hours, seeking and not finding that liquid black that had struck so quickly against my family. Each shadow seemed ready to lash out at me, but everything, save for the corn, was devoid of life. No rabbits took off in a mad dash when I stumbled too close to their warren, no coyotes sang to the moon, no ground birds exploded into flight. Aside from the maddening chatter of stalks and leaves, the night was silent.

The moon sat fat in the sky, its sick silver light showing just enough for me to retrace my steps. I followed the rows back towards my home, but stopped in the edge of my yard. I stared at the house through the stalks, with its peeling white paint, weather beaten shutters, and worn roof. The lights shining from within were alien under that late night moon, out of place and unwelcome. It was strange that the house should be lit like that at this hour, with everyone asleep.

That was when I sprinted up. The tongues of my boots flapped against my shins and I nearly tripped on the concrete steps through the mud room. In the kitchen, Jess was tearing drawers and shelves out from the cabinets. When I burst through the door she spun on me.

"Where the fuck were you?"

"What's going on?" I panted, my throat raw.

"Owen's gone. I think he's hiding somewhere."

My breath caught in my throat. "He's gone?" I ran up the steps to his room.

"What were you doing?" She called up after me.

I didn't answer. Owen had always been a messy kid, but it looked like a storm had rolled through his room. Sheets were tangled and thrown on the floor, his Legos were smashed into a rainbow mess across his bookshelves, and loose papers and drawings were blown throughout the room. The strangest part was that his window was thrown wide open, something he hadn't done since that day in the yard. A black oil clung to the window ledge. I thought I heard a small voice cry "daddy" on the summer breeze and I sprinted back down the stairs.

"What the hell happened?" I stopped in the kitchen, stood over Jess.

She glanced up. "The lights went out. I heard him scream and now I can't find him."

"Where were you?" I grabbed her shoulder but she shrugged me off. I asked her again, this time holding both and turning Jess towards me. She slapped me twice.

"Where the hell were you? You're supposed to keep us safe." She bit her lip as the tears started.

I turned away, grabbed the shotgun in the mudroom. I slid two shells into its barrels, held another two in one hand. I pushed through the screen door and back into the night.

The winds had come alive. They whipped through the fields, driving them into a raucous laughter of plants scraping against each other. I pushed my way through the stalks, but they seemed crowded close together, blocking my way. The leaves' scraping and pulling at me made it a fight to move through each row.

About thirty yards into the field it was like hitting a brick wall. I stripped leaves and ears from the stalks, but they would not yield. The butt of the shotgun snapped

stalks in two but more rose behind them with a creaking chatter to fill the space.

"Dammit!" I stepped back, voice and skin raw, and shouldered the stock. The shotgun's blast echoed through the fields. Its tight-knit scatter blew a three foot hole in the corn. A quick kick to the row's base let me pass through, but only to be met by more resistance.

I was about to fire a second shell when the inky darkness reared up from behind the stalks. Tendrils of midnight oil whipped through the field, the sounds of scraping leaves now deafeningly loud. I emptied the second shell but the shadow only grew higher to cover the moon's shine. I hit my knees and let the two extra shells drop to the field. I don't know how long I stayed like that, staring into the shadow, but I lost myself in that dark, deafening field. The shadow tipped down to me, as if reaching out, then burst into a scatter of black against the sky.

I walked back in silence, the shotgun abandoned and useless. Jess was where I left her in the kitchen, staring into the night with a cup of cold coffee. She looked to me as if hoping our son would step out of my shadow, then looked away.

"Well, then." She sipped her coffee.

The days that followed passed in a daze. Our fields were silent. I called the police, if only to go through the motions, after I'd scrubbed the dark oil from Owen's window sill. They brought out helicopters with those weed-seeking infrared cameras to float across the sky, looking for hot spots and child-sized heat signatures. Nothing turned up.

After a few days of searching they tossed my house, convinced that I'd hidden Owen in the attic, the crawl-space, the closet, a secret compartment, anywhere. After my home was turned upside down and they found

nothing but cobwebs and the remnants of my family, they left. The case grew cold and so did my home.

Jess tried to hang on, but she faded away. I spent my days on the porch, staring at those quiet, giant fields. She moved out a few months after “that night” as she took to calling it. No tears, no yelling, just quietly loading suitcases into the sedan while I half-watched from the porch. When she didn’t come back after a few days, I torched what was left of her things. The black choking smoke from my burn pit swallowed my memories of her and what we used to share. I don’t know where she went, but I hope she’s managed to forget. I haven’t.

The corn rotted in the fields that year. I couldn’t bring myself to harvest it – I was terrified that I would hear a high pitched scream and find child-sized blue jeans shredded by the combine. That sick stench filled the air and crowded around my empty house every night, but at least the nights were quiet.

That summer was ten years ago. Until today I thought nothing had changed. But this morning when I was pouring my coffee, I heard a familiar sound of scraping stalks start to rise out of the field. A sheet of mist was draped over the fields, not yet burnt off by the rays of the rising sun. I walked the perimeter of my fields and a mud-stained baseball rolled out to my feet. The scraping stalks seemed to hiss “*Daddy*.”

I think Owen is waiting for me out there. I’m afraid of what the years have done to him, of what the shadow’s touch has caused. I’ve forgotten most of my life, but not my son’s face. This empty house has held me for too long. That baseball is sitting beside my glove in the mud room. I think I’ll put on my coat and walk the fields today. Throw some fly balls.



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## THE PROBLEM REMOVER

Stanley Rutgers

*Are you dissatisfied with your life? Family weighing you down? Financial woes giving you nightmares? At Problem Removal, Inc., we make it possible for you to erase every glitch life has thrown your way. You'll be a brand new person before you know it!*

I’ve found the key to success is routine. Some might call it habit. Those destined for crime or insanity would no doubt refer to my prescription as boring. That’s fine. I live in a three story house by the ocean. They live in a corporate jail or commercial mental facility. Of course, they’ve been convinced that life is perfect when someone else takes care of you. I know better. I’m one of the clever souls who make it possible for the War on Freedom to work.

Let’s face it, life in the 21st Century, life in the American Union, is not really a life for anyone who can’t afford to make money off of other people’s misery. Only the most clever enjoy an existence that, at the very least, provides the illusion of freedom.

My alarm clock rings, even though it’s not necessary, precisely at five o’clock in the morning every single day. I get up, dress in my gym clothes and work out for exactly one hour and a half. After a shower and shave, I prepare breakfast: A protein shake and two raw eggs.

My wife Barbara wakes up right around the time I leave for work. Her job is to shop. Occasionally I need her for social gatherings. She knows how to make herself prettier than any other woman in the room. This makes