

I Know What To Do
a short story
by Yvonne Navarro

We moved into the apartment in March. I hadn't liked the place since the first time we saw it, but I didn't tell Maggie until after it was too late to do anything. I don't know why; maybe I wanted to have something to hold over her head. It seemed like she'd controlled everything since we got married: the money, where we lived, what we ate, everything. If I'd said how much I hated the place -- and I think I did drop a couple of obvious hints -- she would have sat across from me at the kitchen table with that "let's talk about this in a reasonable manner" look on her face and explained how we were saving money (twenty-five bucks a month, big fucking deal), the landlord at the old place was going to sell the building and then the rent would go up, on and on, until I ended up agreeing with her anyway. By keeping my mouth shut I had future artillery if I wanted it. Not that I don't love her, I do. I wouldn't have married her otherwise, not after the shit I went through with my first wife. In fact, if you wanted to use Maggie's psycho-babble, the ex probably had a lot to do with my attraction to Maggie. Security, a sense of organization, her always knowing what to do -- sounds like a bunch of crap for a man to be saying, doesn't it? Like the old expression goes, you had to be there. Spend a few years with my ex and you'll understand. The place was all right, I suppose. It was hard to compete with my old apartment and its golden wood floors and wall full of unblocked east windows. The new one was standard inner-city Chicago: dark and somewhat smaller, with a building on the east and an alley on the west. It was a first floor too, and it made me nervous to think how easy it would be for some punk to break in, whether or not we were home. We moved in. The dog acted weird right from the start.

"Get out of there!"

At 5:45 in the morning I wasn't expecting any loud noises and I nearly overturned my coffee when Maggie yelled. The small hallway that was the connecting point of most of the rooms was mostly in shadows, but I could still make out Chanci's gangly black shape with her head poked into the bathroom. "What the hell is she doing?" I asked. The dog made the mistake of stepping into the bathroom and Maggie was down the hall instantly to plant a solid whack on Chanci's rump. "Out!" The animal backpedalled and ran for the living room, nails slipping on the linoleum. For a second I thought she was going to trip and fall flat and I groaned inside; the

dog was so clumsy it was embarrassing.
Maggie glanced into the bathroom and looked around, muttering to herself about
dog hairs. It was still early, so I decided to keep my opinion about white
throw
rugs to myself.
"What was she looking at?" I asked, reaching down to tie my boots.
"I don't know," she said, flipping on the light. "There's nothing in here --
wait! Oh Jesus." She sounded disgusted.
"Now what?" I looked at the boots doubtfully. There was some serious wear
around
the backs; I figured by the end of the week I'd need a new pair and wondered
if
we had the money. Out of that same paycheck would have to come Dolly's
alimony
payment. With a name like that you'd think I would have known better.
"I think we've got cockroaches."
I got up and went to the bathroom door. "Where? Did you see one?" The room
looked clean to me -- too clean. That's the effect when you use too much
white,
like in a hospital. Personally I always went for blue.
"I think so -- I mean I saw something. It ran under the bathtub."
We had one of those old-fashioned clawfoot tubs, the kind with about four or
five inches of space under it. I got down on my knees and peered underneath,
but
it was too dark to see anything. That was another thing that went against the
place: one stupid fluorescent light in the bathroom. I hated fluorescent
lights
and my list of grievances was growing longer. There was something way in the
back, but I wasn't sure; maybe just a hole in the plaster around the
baseboard
-- the building wasn't exactly in great shape. I stuck an arm under the tub
and
groped around for a few seconds, knowing that no cockroach on this earth is
going to let me catch it. I've lived in worse places and roaches were old
territory to me.
Something bit me on the forefinger.
I mean really bit me -- fire spread up my finger and through the palm even
before I could yank my arm out from beneath the tub. "Son of a bitch!" I
screamed, jerking up from the floor and grabbing for the faucet. Garbled
thoughts of scorpions under the tub ran through my head.
"What happened? John, are you okay?" Maggie thought she was frantic, she
should've had the feeling of burning napalm going through her hand like I
did.
While the icy water cooled the stinging, the water pressure made it throb
nastily. Being a stonemason has gotten me a few fingers sandwiched between
slabs
of granite, but man, I've never hurt this bad. Air hissed in and out from
between my teeth and I'll give Maggie one thing: she knows when to keep her
mouth shut. When I didn't answer, she just stood there and waited, working
her
hands together nervously.
After a few minutes, the water seemed to do the trick and I turned it off so
we
could examine my finger. The only thing we found were two tiny, swollen
places,
one on each side just under the edge of the nail -- maybe that's why it hurt
so
much -- where minute chunks of skin were gone. But they weren't even
bleeding,

or if they had the water had washed it away. While I still didn't know what had done it, I was relieved. Visions of mice and rats swirled in my brain; I didn't know if mice carried rabies or not, but with no teeth marks on my hand I wouldn't have to worry about it. "Do cockroaches bite?" Maggie asked doubtfully as she dabbed Polysporin® on the wound and wrapped it with a Band-Aid®. "I've never had one bit me before," I answered. "Though I have read that in places where there are major infestations, like in housing projects, they'll eat the eyelashes off of sleeping babies." She gaped at me and I realized I'd made a mistake. Her face twisted. "That's revolting!" What can I say? It was too late anyway; as I left for work she was hauling bucket and rags and pine cleaner out of the pantry. I figured in the hour before she'd have to get ready for work she'd have our white bathroom smelling like a hospital too.

The next morning I saw it. Maggie was in the kitchen packing my lunch and thankfully didn't see the dog crouching half inside the bathroom door, or Chanci would've probably gotten a couple of whacks for doing it two days in a row. I couldn't stand to see that -- Chanci may be big (she's half Lab and half Great Dane), but she's nothing but a silly puppy in a ten-year old body. And normally well-behaved: she doesn't bark, bite, or crap in the house. It seemed a shame for her to get cracked just because the bathroom had bugs and she was curious. Though I could understand why! The damn thing was huge, maybe as long as my thumb, a couple of inches at least -- no exaggeration. It went scuttling backwards under the tub when I reached around and flipped the light switch, but I could have sworn that it was only about a half a foot away from the dog -- like it wasn't afraid of her at all. Well, Mama didn't raise an idiot and I'd be damned if I was going to stick my hand back under the tub. To be honest, the memory of that pain was enough to make me hesitate about kneeling down and looking, but in the end I did, after glancing out of the door and making sure Maggie was still messing with my lunch box. It would really make her crazy to think there was a roach crawling around the bathroom she'd practically sterilized yesterday. I thought I saw it, way back in the corner -- the same spot as yesterday, when I'd stupidly tried to grab it. I got back up and strolled into the kitchen without saying anything, first making sure that Chanci was in the other room to stay. "I think I'll pick up some bug spray on the way home," I said. Maggie whirled. I could see her fingers clench around the peach that was slotted as today's dessert and resigned myself to bruised fruit. "Did you see another one? Where? In the bathroom again?" "No," I lied. "Just a precaution. We never did catch that one yesterday."

Unless

you...?" She shook her head. "That goes to show you. It'll probably come back, maybe with a family." She scrunched up her shoulders and shivered. "We'll start spraying, everyday at first, then once a week. That'll kill them off and keep them gone."

Friday morning I sat at the kitchen table -- sometimes it seems we spend our lives at the kitchen table -- and made out Dolly's check. Maggie paid the other bills that were due and pushed a few aside that she figured could hold out another week; I could feel a breeze in a few places in my boots, but new ones would still have to wait. The alimony was the only bill I had to take care of personally and after four years writing that check still hurt to the heart. While Maggie didn't complain -- which wouldn't have made any difference -- she refused to write the check out and made me mail it myself. Dolly was living on public aid down in Missouri with her two sons from a previous marriage, a couple of pre-teen Nazis who liked things like dissecting live frogs and pulling legs off grasshoppers. One-fifty a month isn't much until you supplement it with twenty-five percent of my weekly take-home pay and double child support from some other guy. It's hard going to work when you know that ten hours a week is for some bitch in a backwoods Missouri town where eighty bucks will rent you a farmhouse for a month. And here I was, a working joe who couldn't afford a new pair of boots. It's a good thing I'd just finished my signature when the dog howled or I might have dug right through the paper. The ink pen went flying out of my fingers when I jumped up and both Maggie and I ran for the hallway. My attention had been centered on the check and my ex and I hadn't even seen Chanci creep all the way into the bathroom. Now she came rolling out as if something had knocked her off her feet, paws flailing at her nose. She slipped on the linoleum and went down, yowls getting louder as Maggie grabbed for her collar and I grabbed for anything. Maggie finally threw herself across the dog and pinned her to the floor. Chanci's howling filled the apartment as she struggled wildly and whipped her head back and forth. I already had an idea about what had happened. "What's the matter with her, John?" Maggie cried. "Hold her!" I shouted, lunging for her head. I guessed right away that one of those cockroach things had bit her on the face; what I couldn't figure out was how we were going to calm the old girl down before she had a heart attack. I also hadn't counted on the damned thin still hanging onto Chanci's nose. The three of us scrambled around on the floor for about thirty seconds or so -- I admit I didn't know what to do. I sure as shit didn't want to grab that thing with my hand, but I had to do something: Chanci's head was jerking in every direction and I could see flashes of the insect's dangling black body -- it

showed no signs of letting go. Her yowling was getting worse; I was afraid it was chewing on her.

"John!" Maggie sounded on the verge of hysteria.

"Hang on -- I'll be right back!" I ran back into the kitchen, sliding on the floor and cracking my knee as I came around the cabinet and yanked out a drawer.

Behind me, Maggie's cries of Stay! were getting hoarse and Chanci's yelps were coming faster.

"John, I can't hold her!"

Both hands plunged into the midst of the aluminum gadgets and searched frantically -- there, a pair of tongs with serrated edges. I barreled into the

hallway pointing the thing like a gun, as if just the sight would drive the creature away, but no such luck.

"She's getting loose!" Chanci had almost squirmed out from under Maggie and I could see places where the dog's nails had raked welts into my wife's skin. I sprawled on top of the animal's back end and reached around Maggie, who was trying unsuccessfully to hold Chanci's thrashing legs; any second now I expected

my lovable mutt to chomp into one of us. Pain has a way of changing personality.

I outweigh Maggie by a good fifty pounds, but that dog was still bucking under

me like some kind of wild horse. She opened her mouth and showed those old yellow teeth and I thought, Here it comes! but before it could I shoved my left

fist into her throat and forced her head as far back as it would go against Maggie's arm. I ignored Maggie's shocked protest and reached over with the other

hand and clamped onto the shell of that thing with the tongs, dug in hard and pulled.

It came off fast, but the amount of resistance against my arm muscles made my stomach twist in sick sympathy. The noise Chanci made sounded more like a screaming baby than a dog and Maggie screamed right along with her. It wasn't until I pulled my fist out of the dog's mouth and stood up with that thing on the end of those tongs that I realized I'd hollered too.

Chanci scrunched herself into a corner and pawed at her nose, with Maggie crouched beside her trying to talk soothingly. I saw spots of blood dripping down the tongs and half-fell into the bathroom, intending to flush that thing right down the toilet. As I reached for the lid my right hand bumped against the

sink and the tongs opened a fraction too much.

The roach fell to the floor and made for the bathtub.

"Mother fucker!" I bellowed. My work boot came down with a hundred and eighty pounds of crazed construction worker in it and I danced on that little son of a

bitch for a full ten seconds. Then I slumped against the sink and tried to catch

my breath; the tongs had gone sailing into that unfriendly area under the tub.

Maggie was still talking softly to Chanci; I don't even think she heard me swear

over the dog's whines. She might play the stern master but the charade didn't fool me; that dog's grizzled face and big brown eyes made her melt inside. I rinsed my face and hands at the sink to get the sweat and dog smell off, then

dried myself, grabbed a hunk of toilet paper and squatted down. It was an ugly

thing, even bigger than I remembered, with sharp mandibles sticking out from each side of its head -- maybe it wasn't a cockroach at all, but some kind of beetle. No wonder the bug spray hadn't worked; this sucker looked tough. I leaned closer and almost gagged. There was some kind of translucent egg sac tucked under its rear end; tiny black things pulsed inside.

Gross, I thought. Let the sewers handle it. I knew I'd have to do it quick or I'd lose my nerve; the thought of those babies twitching around with only a few

layers of paper between them and my fingers made my balls shrink up. But I couldn't leave it on the floor and go after the dustpan -- if Maggie saw that egg sac she'd go nuts.

I reached for it.

It ran.

Towards me.

Memories rocketed through my mind: a hand full of fire; Chanci squirming on the floor in agony; the grainy feel of tearing dog flesh as the tongs did their work.

"Aaarrghh!" My legs went out from under me and my rump hit the floor hard, boots

kicking furiously. The left one, thank God, connected and knocked it back a foot

or so; the beetle-thing darted under the bathtub.

"What're you doing in there?"

The sounds from the hall had changed. Chanci's protests had softened to whimpers; I heard Maggie's slippers make small slapping sounds and clambered to

my feet and hit the toilet handle before she came around the door. "Did you kill it?"

"Yeah," I said, trying to squelch the shakes that were working through my hands.

"I flushed it down the toilet."

"That's good," she said almost cheerfully as she turned away. "I hope we don't

get any more of those nasty things."

Jesus, I thought. What am I going to do?

The dog was okay, though she stopped sticking her face into the bathroom. Her nose was a little shredded, but like my finger there was no permanent damage. The

way she looked at me after we finished dabbing at her snout with peroxide, it was like a kinship. We both knew what it felt like to have something try and eat

you, and it had nothing to do with sex either.

Saturday and Sunday are Maggie's days to sleep late, since she gets up with me

at five during the week. I'm an early riser even on the weekends, generally dozing on and off for awhile, then getting up and leaving Maggie to rest for a

few more hours. That's the time I do a few things around the house -- whatever

can be done without much noise -- take care of business, so to speak. If there's

nothing that needs to be done, I'll just watch television, cartoons or maybe an

old movie on cable.

Pre-dawn Sunday I had business to take care of. I stood outside the bathroom

door in near darkness, staring into that little room with no better light than what came from a feeble nightlight in the kitchen. But it was enough. My hands held sophisticated hunting tools: a piece of paper and a glass jar with a lid. If I couldn't kill it, then I'd catch it and trust my gut feeling that there was only one of those creatures, a mutant. A single indestructible beetle-thing in this whole fucking world and it had to be in my house -- life's a real bitch sometimes. What I did know for a fact was that there wouldn't be just one for long and I had to catch that thing before it gave birth. I'd tried this same gig Saturday and gotten nowhere, though I hadn't given up until I'd heard Maggie moving around in the bedroom. I figured what I needed was live bait. Taking my house shoe off was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, next to actually putting my sweating, defenseless foot down on the cold tile of the bathroom floor. If it wanted fresh meat, it would have to come out almost to the door; I couldn't bring myself to get any closer than three feet from the tub. I felt it before it attacked -- some kind of primal sixth sense kicked in and saved my ass, and I'm not fool enough to claim I wouldn't have screamed if it had bit me again. I smacked that jar open-end down on the floor so hard it was a damned miracle it didn't shatter. Then I just knelt there, breathing hard, water dripping off my head like it was ninety-five in the sun instead of a winter-chilly morning in a dark bathroom. Vibrations ran through the jar and into my hand, making my skin crawl and dread pulled my lips thin as I slid the paper between the jar and the floor and flipped it upright, twisting the lid on without bothering to take away the paper. I was too afraid. At about the same time as I switched on the light, I thought how silly it was for a grown man to be afraid of an insect. Mandibles clicking, the thing in the jar started slamming against the glass in a futile attempt at escape and with both relief and revulsion, I saw the egg sac was still connected and throbbing with unborn life. Maybe my fear wasn't so stupid after all.

By Monday afternoon I was afraid lack of oxygen would kill it, though I hadn't risked drilling even the tiniest hole in the lid because of the impending babies. With a couple of hours to spare before Maggie got home, I took my time retrieving the jar from its hiding place among the camping gear in the basement. The thing inside seemed paralyzed for about five minutes, then began ramming the glass energetically. I figured it must be like a person who keeps running headlong into a foot-thick concrete wall and stopped worrying. If me stomping on it didn't destroy it, neither would a few days of thinned-out air, though the cold in the basement had made it sluggish. Chances are it would probably die

off

in cold weather like other insects.

I turned up something else from the basement: a little box that had once held a

new lantern glass. It was just the right size for the jar, with a little extra

room for padding -- some of those great little air bubble sheets were still inside. I put it all together carefully and addressed it using block letters and

a backhand slant that didn't resemble my usual scribbling at all, though I really didn't think it would matter.

I was much calmer now. Organization, a sense of security and always knowing what

to do, things patiently modeled for me by Maggie. Knowing how to take care of business, that was the key. I shook the package gently; not a sound could make

it past all those air bubbles.

The clock showed I still had an hour before Maggie got home. I could walk there

and back and still have time to shower.

"Hi," I said happily. "How much to mail this first class?" The woman behind the

window didn't smile back at me when I pushed the box forward, but I didn't care.

She dropped it on the scale and I winced slightly.

"Dollar-fifty."

"Fine," I said. "Let me have it in stamps, please. And a fragile sticker too."

That earned me a dirty look, but I still walked out of the post office with a big shit-ass grin on my face.

A warm, wet April breeze blew in the door with us. We'd been out for a Saturday

brunch, nothing fancy but still a treat considering our budget. Maggie checked

the mail and I walked on inside and opened the blinds in the front room; for a

second the sun broke through the cloud cover and shone in the window to send bright stripes of light bouncing across the carpet. The place I'd once hated finally seemed like home.

"Look at this, Johnny," Maggie said as she flipped through the envelopes. She always called me Johnny when we were getting along really well. "The alimony check came back unclaimed. I wonder what's going on."

I just smiled.

Afterword

"I Know What To Do" was written when I was married and my (now ex-)husband was

still getting annoying calls from his first wife.

The dog in the story was based on my real dog at the time (Chanci), as was the

Chicago apartment and the bug problem. Some of the more harmless things in the

story actually follow my own true life reactions to those disgusting little creatures-- yes, that was me standing on the kitchen counter in the wee hours of the morning and ripping dishes out of cabinets. I can never think of this story without remembering one well-known male editor who rejected it and told me in no uncertain terms that "the woman in the story didn't seem real and would have never done that."
"I Know What To Do" was my first sale to a professional anthology and also my first appearance in a hardcover book.

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