

## **Avatar**

By T. E. Stazyk

On the day after Christmas, I saw my neighbors, the Remingtons, out in their front yard. I have always felt that, at least as far as the Remingtons are concerned, I am blessed with, for the most part, good neighbors. We all get along and maintain a pleasant atmosphere, primarily by minimizing contact with each other.

But even though we have had almost no verbal interaction since they arrived in the early 90s, I feel as though I am an intimate member of the family. This is because over the years I have watched the family grow. First, as they installed increasingly esoteric jungle gym equipment in the back yard; later as they periodically modified the garage to accommodate ever larger SUVs; and most recently (and this with occasional alarm) as a sarabande of bizarre and terrifying life forms have accreted to the property in the form of friends of the now adolescent children. Evidently, the house is a desirable place because both of the Remington parents are immersed in careers that require long periods of absence from the house, thereby affording the children long stretches of blissfully unsupervised time. As I recall, Mr. Remington is with one of the banks and does complicated things with equities. Mrs. Remington is a partner in a law firm and specialises in litigation.

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There are three Remington progeny. Cody, sixteen, looks like he might weigh about ninety pounds if the metal were removed from his body. However, one cannot be certain because of the spectacular pompadour of variable, but always indeterminate, color that makes his head and the rest of his body look fragile and unsubstantial. My wife and I have often speculated on exactly what *point* Cody is trying to make with his hair. I remember hearing about a book titled *The Art of Self Uglification*, and although I do not know if it really exists – I should Google it one of these days – if it does exist, it could explain the source of Cody’s tonsorial superstructure. It could also explain virtually everything else about his physical appearance. Up until maybe his fourteenth year, Cody was actually a fairly pleasant looking child. In those days his wardrobe seemed limited to uniforms – either Lincoln Academy, the exclusive private school his parents sent him to, or baseball, depending on the season--and his verbal complement appeared to consist solely of the word “Hiya,” on the rare occasions that our paths intersected. But in the past few years, Cody has changed. Whether he is finding himself, fallen in with a bad crowd or simply gone nuts, he now looks just plain weird. I mean scary weird. Like Charles Manson weird. Or like something might come popping out of his chest at any minute weird. Plus, there’s the acne.

If I had a better relationship with the Remingtons, I might just ask them, “What is the deal with Cody?” But I think they would take a dim view of such a

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liberty, especially because one must assume that they at least tacitly approve of his persona, given they have to face it on a daily basis, more or less.

Cody has a fourteen-year-old brother, Sky, who shows a fondness for baseball caps, rap and hip hop music, and, based on his complexion and physique, foods high in sugar. Our Neighborhood Watch lady, Sybil, tells me that Sky is “known to law enforcement,” and is “responsible for more vandalism and graffiti than any other kid in town.” I don’t know if I believe that, however. First, there is the question of the veracity of anything Sybil says. She has a scar on her midriff that she is fond of showing off and that she claims she received in a knife fight. Although she is vague on exactly what happened and who won, she leads one to believe that she is well connected to local law enforcement and therefore is privy to such insider information. The other reason I am disinclined to believe her allegation is that I would think that if Sky were known to the police, his parents would know; and, being relatively upstanding members of the community, that they would take a dim view of his nocturnal expressions. On the other hand, they may not be aware of the ease with which he exits and enters his first floor bedroom after midnight – a feat that I have witnessed regularly. Nevertheless, Sky is the friendliest of the Remingtons, always cheerfully waving and saying hello when we see him (unless he is clandestinely backing out of his bedroom window) and his seemingly more congenial form of antisocial behaviour makes him significantly less scary than his older brother.

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The baby of the family, Brandi, is twelve going on twenty-eight. She likes black and her sole means of communication appears to be her cell phone and the f-word. She is a very alarming person. For one thing, she has a tattoo at the base of her spine, generally visible, which my wife thinks, and I agree, looks like the biohazard logo that appears on medical waste containers. She also must have some sort of masochistic tendencies because it has got to be painful for her to hold her face in the rictus of surprised, baffled, disdainful irritation that is her constant aspect. It is very hard to describe, except that as a smirk, it simply begs to be wiped off her face – mouth slightly open, nose slightly wrinkled and eyes slightly closed. It is as if the world never ceased to amaze her with its inability to live up to her expectations and it perfectly captures the pain she must feel at being continually exposed to so many uncool people. Either that or she has a serious lower gastro-intestinal problem. Maybe that explains the tattoo.

Either in anticipation of, or secure in the knowledge of, substantial annual bonuses, the Remingtons usually spend the Christmas holidays on vacation in some exotic place that you have to take a helicopter or private yacht to. Come to think of it, our main contact with them over the years has been via their Christmas vacation post cards from six star resorts. So I was surprised when two days before Christmas, I saw Mrs. Remington's Mercedes SUV in the drive. Only then did I recall that my wife and I hadn't had received the annual "Don't you wish you were us?" card from some inaccessible corner of the earth. That is why, on the day after Christmas, I was surprised to see Mr. Remington himself

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standing in the front yard. To my amazement, I also discerned the wraith-like and top-heavy Cody and after fleetingly thinking they had a burkha-clad houseguest, observed Brandi as well. Both children looked alarmingly bored. Soon thereafter, Sky lumbered into to view. In the past ten years I had never seen the entire family such simultaneous and close proximity to one another. Their attention was focused on something outside of my field of vision, but, intrigued by the level of activity, I called to my wife and we agreed that in the spirit of the season, and to satisfy our curiosity as to why they had stayed home this Christmas, I should go out to say hello.

My next clear memory was Remington's concerned face looking down at me. I was lying on the ground, chest burning and my basal brain urgently commanding my lungs to inflate. Sky was using his slightly superior weight to contain a snarling, mass of black fur, white fangs and dripping jowls.

"You OK? Sorry about that. Avatar just got out of obedience school and isn't used to strangers yet. Friendly, isn't he?"

"Uhhhh." I had made the mistake of opening the Remington front gate, at which time, Avatar had launched himself at me. Remington may have thought his intention was to lick my face, but I was sure those snapping jaws had my throat as their objective.

Avatar was going absolutely berserk as I picked myself up, intending to flee, when Mrs. Remington burst out of the house and gathered the writhing

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monster in her arms. "Who's upsetting my baby?" she cooed, looking accusingly at me.

My primal fight or flight reaction ratcheted up a few notches as I remembered her reputation as a plaintiff's attorney. I slowly got to my feet while the Remington clan stared at me in a disturbing neo-Gothic tableau. "I-I-I just wanted to say Merry Christmas," I managed to get out.

They looked at each other. Confused. Mrs. Remington took the growling horror into the house and after a pause during which my pulse returned to normal, Remington cleared his throat. "Thanks for stopping by. Why don't you come in for a drink?"

I suppressed a shudder at the thought. "No thanks, I better get going."

"Maybe some other time. I know you want to get to know Avatar a little better."

"Yeah. Are the kids excited about their new pet?"

"No."

"What about you?"

"I hate dogs."

"Then why?" I gestured vaguely.

"It was my wife's idea. She's been crying that now that the kids have gotten big, she needs something she can baby and cuddle."

"Uh, how big is he going to get?"

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“I don’t know. He’s mixed. Some Rottweiler, some Great Dane and I think some Alsatian. He’ll make a great watch dog, too.”

“Sure looks that way.”

“Oh, why don’t you come in for a drink? We hardly ever see you. Call your wife and we can catch up.”

Still hyperventilating, I excused myself and reluctantly summoned my wife. She instantly agreed, looking forward to doing some first hand data gathering on the Remington lifestyle.

I opened the gate cautiously. No one was around. Remington had gone inside to tell his wife that we were coming over and, we fervently hoped, to secure Avatar. We knocked on the door and Remington opened it. To my horror, Avatar was behind him, snarling. Once we nervously crossed the threshold, however, he turned into a playful puppy. Remington ushered us into the house and invited us to make ourselves comfortable on the living room couch. It was horrible. Avatar sped around the house, pausing only to jump on us and lick us. Remington explained that obedience school had taught Avatar that people welcomed into the house were friends and were to be treated as such. Intruders wouldn’t be so lucky.

But that was a minor distraction compared to everything else. The kids had vanished, but there was a pervasive boom of a stereo set to maximum bass filling the house from an as yet undetermined source. Although the Remington house looked like a Tudor mansion from the outside, the interior looked like

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some sort of Dali-esque apocalyptic wasteland. The furnishings, artwork and appointments were all ultra modern. It looked like a cross between the space shuttle's cargo bay and a Pueblo cliff dwelling. The furniture could either have been various high tech exercise machines or instruments of torture, but not as comfortable to sit on. Remington excused himself to open a bottle of Chardonnay as Mrs. Remington explained her decorating philosophy. I glanced at my wife, and was shocked to see that her face had the same expression as Brandi's.

Remington brought out the drinks and we toasted each other and the holidays after which Mrs. Remington invited us on a tour of the house. We agreed and, assuming the air of a docent in the art museum, she gave us the source and lineage of the various artworks and objects on display. The tour was exhaustive except for the children's rooms. "We're not allowed," explained Mrs. Remington, indicating three closed doors, one of which was the source of the seismic pulsations that could have dissolved kidney stones, but to which the Remingtons seemed oblivious.

We got back to the living room, and holding her glass above the leaping Avatar and trying to get comfortable on a chrome, leather and fur tripod sort of apparatus which resembled an electric bull, not only in its bovine shape and upholstery, but also in its seemingly malevolent desire to throw her to the floor, my wife asked the question that had precipitated our entire visit. "So, don't you usually go away for the holidays?"

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“Yes,” said Mrs. Remington. “We’ve had such wonderful trips in the past. But this year we couldn’t agree on a venue. So *I* decided we would get a dog and stay home to bond with it.” She reached over and grabbed Avatar’s collar and wrenched him from my lap into hers. “Aren’t we bonding my little babykins?” she cooed to the flailing mass of legs, ears and saliva.

“Couldn’t agree?” I asked, trying to keep the conversation coherent. And wondering whether anyone had ever referred to a vacation destination as a venue before.

Remington jumped in. “No. We wanted to try out this new six star resort in the Maldives. It would have been great. But the kids decided that they were tired of beach resorts.”

“I *so* need a beach holiday to unwind,” said Mrs. Remington. “And this place had everything. High speed Internet, each suite has a fully equipped office, twice daily Federal Express deliveries, conference room facilities, *and* secretarial support.”

“Plus big screen plasma TV and a completely up to date DVD library.”

“I mean, what more could you ask? But Cody wanted to stay home. Sky wanted to ski and Brandi wanted to go to Thailand with her two school friends. And that’s when it hit me. My babies are growing up. We won’t be a family anymore.”

“We realized that if the kids didn’t want to be there,” said Remington, “none of us would have fun.”

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“And I realized that we were going to become empty nesters some day soon. At first I thought that a little sister or brother would keep the kids close. You know, keep the family group together. We actually looked into adopting a child. From Eastern Europe, of course. But the paper work. And the risks. Plus, you have to go over there and who has the time for that? So we settled on little snookums here, didn’t we?” She fiercely embraced Avatar who responded with a loss of bowel and bladder functions.

Remington let out a disgusted, “Oh, God.”

But Mrs. Remington gently set Avatar down and said, “It’s all right. Just a little faux pas. Dear?” The “dear” was addressed to Remington and was accompanied by a meaningful, if fleeting, glance at the “faux pas.” Remington excused himself and came back with rubber gloves, a plastic shovel and a mop. My wife and I wracked our brains, wondering what proper etiquette called for in the circumstances.

I took advantage of an empty glass and stood up saying, “Well, we won’t keep you any longer. It was nice spending some time with you.”

“Yes, let’s do it again,” said Mrs. Remington.

“Hang on, I’ll show you out,” said Remington.

“It’s OK,” I said as Avatar leapt first on my wife and then on me as we stood up.

On the short walk home my wife said, “Now that was interesting.”

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“Yes. When do you think we should invite them over for dinner or something?” My wife failed to respond, and, wondering what she was thinking, I glanced over at her. She was giving me the Brandi look.