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A Knock in the Night: Short Story

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Abstract:

Two runaways survive a winter's night in the deep woods between one town and the next.

Keywords: Fiction, Short Story, Literature, Creative Writing

He never told her, but there come caesurae, pulse-lulls of purest silence in the night, when he tilts back his tiny skull washed with frost toward the vault of faultless dark above & hears voices. Whispers, chiming coldly from the vast blackness. And where stars drip winking in their frozen gloss he also senses the faint shapes of faces—giant, shipwrecked spirits, beaming in an ocean of sucked-up dreams. Weeping, at the world they must be seeing...

I had another one last night, she says, plucking through the forest snows. Beneath glasswebs of twinkling bough. There were mountains and lakes. Angels and mandrakes. The world underwater. Cities of sculpted fire. A cave. Inside, I heard you crying. You were dying.

It's just a dream, he says, & deepens her prints with his own. Dreams don't mean anything.

But it felt so real. Not in the way dreams do. More like a warning, a future wished for. And not mine. But yours.

It doesn't mean anything.

How can you be so sure?

How can't you? Where's the meaning in what might be, what could happen? Other than fear, and false comfort. The future doesn't exist. It's a lie. Besides, I won't cry when I die.

They come to an old yule, massive & ironbarked, guarding the thicker woods. They trudge on, palm-in-palm, hearts tolling softly against the pale flowers of their bones. At a certain point they came to swear away any hope for reversals, miracles. Their only remaining salvation is each other.

These woods. Don't they remind you of...? She doesn't need to finish. They sit on a lightningstruck log & devour rockhard candy bars. Shoulders rubbed together, swells of sweetness in their gums even as the wrappers fall, vacant, into the small knot of their woven hands.

They tried not to travel at night. But they had mistimed, run out of food, & now the rasps & whines of their bodies draw them to the next town, just beyond the forest. They can't risk being seen stalking the lonely mountain roads. '911 —runaways limping north.'

Day by day, they chant. Dawn by dawn. That's how they live. Another lie, since, no matter how cold, to what shade the airs stir & sulk, they prefer their necessary closeness on the frostlit earth to the severing blaze of the sun. Night by night, moon by moon—the true mantra of their lives, its floating orbit...

I think it's only a couple more miles. He rises, unlaces their fingers to lick off the last spots of fudge. *There must be a bridge. Something to sleep under. We'll buy a tarp.*

Buy?

We'll steal a tarp. And some food.

She is slow to stand, a dull gauze to her eye.

What's wrong?

You say you don't believe in dreams. But would you believe in gut-feelings? Isn't that what brought us here?

What's your gut telling you?

We should turn around. At least for now.

Turn around? And go where? Back to that shed? There's nothing left there.

At least we know that.

So you're afraid of the unknown? That's not like you. Doesn't even ring a bell.

This time it does. Don't ask me why. We're pushing the edge of something dark. And not the kind of dark we're meant to run into.

He looks at her. She looks back. Neither turns away.

If I go, he whispers, will you make me go alone?

She doesn't answer.

He walks on into the forest. A few seconds later, her footsteps follow crunching behind. She will hate him. For a day, maybe two. He is not a fool. The 9mm stolen from a ramshackle garage one rainy evening off the turnpike south sleeps frigid in his pocket, a cool neuron twitching to fire. Posters, at the foothills of the towns passed. Missing pets. Collies, sphinx, hares. Children. The portraits of premature ghosts, plastered over rotting telephone poles. A girl found in the creek. Thirteen years old. They spoke of her on the radios before daybreak. Abduction, eleven months. Signs of torture. Starvation. Pregnant, but the infant had been carved out. Butcherknife fragments. Burns. No suspects. Only call numbers, hotlines, numbers inscribed voidblack in chains of chipping ink.

He draws back & reaches for her hand. She yanks away, brows knitted. The rosewine shine of her cheeks, tiny fissures in wilt-petal lips... it was always this way. That first night in the

forest glade, where they met. He tiptoed in expecting only the sterling hush of his refuge—but, out of nowhere, there she shone. An extraterrestrial, a lunar fairy perched upon an altar of alien snow. & when she glanced back him he understood what they were. Organisms alternate but in substance coordinate. Mirror of shadow & soul.

They left the solstice next. Palm-in-palm, just as they are now, across the cottonball hills of their neighborhood. They took shelter in cowfields. Bluegrass lakes sparkling in the starlight. Fireflies warmly constellated, tiny suns suspended. They ate stolen sourdough. Graying cheese like miniature halfmoons. They slept coiled beneath the galactic circus, sash of magic. By dawn they'd already left the cattle behind, big inkwell eyes mooing goodbye. Two days later they broke into a condominium beside a cattail marsh for food. They spent the next season wandering. Drifting lankly from meadow to meadow & borough to borough like émigré wraiths. They played with dumpster magnets, with dusty rubber balls & flashcards swiped from bankrupt dollarshops. No one sought them. No one prayed for them. So at moonrise they would lie curled atop the tallest mound in sight & etch fables into the stars, their names in the roaming milky glow. What was that? Shooting faintly past them then? A comet—fine & swift, scarletshot? Or a string, twined in blood between vast, impassable spaces. *I'll never leave*, they murmured into the pockets of each other's necks. *I'll never let you go...*

They come to a fork in the overgrowth. Two skinny paths, paved ruggedly into the hanging thicket gloom.

Trails? she asks.

Town must be closer than we thought.

Then why is it so... & they say it, within themselves, together... *dark?*

It doesn't matter, he says. *We just need to keep heading north.*

So which one?

We don't have to take one at all.

The forest is too dense here to scramble.

We've gotten this far.

She folds her arms. *We should wait. For sunrise.*

We can't steal during the day. You know that. And we can't hike tomorrow starving.

At least we'll be able to see.

We don't need to. We just have to go slow. Trust me.

When he gives her his hand now it is not an offering of apology, or encouragement, but a question. A reaffirmation of what they once promised.

She takes it, mumbling, *but did you ever trust me?*

A question not meant for an answer.

They creep noses-first through the brush, like raccoons. He must paw the pitch in front of him, caress for contours, recognizable textures.

Dead bush, thorny. And steep. Stay close.

I know.

A loose branch spikes his hairline & ten steps later he licks at his own blood. A rusty leak of heat. A sign that somewhere within flames still breathe.

She stops.

What is it?

Did you hear that?

Hear what?

He can't see her face, jacketed in defoliate sprigs. Weighed down, by the momenta of adrenal fright.

It's nothing, he says. Just an animal, probably. No bears here. Keep moving.

She doesn't.

Come on.

No.

You seriously want to stick around? Here?

No. I'm heading back.

Hey. Stop. An icicle across his cheek. Damn. Turn around.

She digs her way up the tangled slope.

Come back. A crack to his shout. *Don't go. You said you'd never go*—and he lurches out & grasps her wrist & she tugs & he tugs harder & then she cranks her head & he sees she is crying, a sorrow-rage unsheathed & slicing in her saber glare. Before either can soak in the aftershimmers of one in the other they are tumbling, blasting down the mountainside. Impacts of bough & bone, jaw & stalk, skull & racing stone. It ends with a shadowclap, drop of fractured cosmos upon his frail, flickering brain. When he comes to she lies reddened before him. She blinks.

You're bleeding.

So are you.

They bear up together, climbing each other's crimson limbs until their eyes tether level. He wonders, have they always been the same height? When did he start looking down at her? They gape at where they'd fallen.

A glade. Immaculate, a shrine for sylphs. Moonsilver washing over satin grass,
lightwaves in deepwater.

It's just like... again, she does not need to finish. Just like the one, back then, what seems
like lifetimes ago. A dyad, or duplicate? Neither knows. The isles of memory in space-time seas,
disintegrating.

Let me look at you. We shouldn't stay—

And this time it's he who hears it. Although they both feel it, all at once. An abrupt
freezing, the aura of the empty earthless skies, & somehow it flows from right behind them.

A man, looming rigid & lean. They stare. He is naked, from scalp to heel. Skin the
deathwhite of crushed daisies, fishboned, so gaunt the edges of his shoulders glint like epaulettes
of raw stone. No lips, the flesh stitched together. No eyelids, except for the crescents of red
where they'd been torn off, eyes searing colorless like phantom lanterns into their own.

The man cups the air politely, gestures them forward. In the other hand he dangles the
corpse of a dog by the collar, small & almond, eyeless. The only trail onward carves out just
behind him. This one clean, without brambles or duff. A mouth of perfect blackness.

She makes a little sound beside him. Too gentle for a scream, but strangled, a deepsleep
gasp.

Co... It beckons, hunched over, with its talon-nails. *Co... Come...*

Then the gun is out. He's shot it before, practiced in junkyards after dusk, but it tips
heavier now. Tremors, with the palpitations of his own winnowing heart.

Leave us alone.

It steps forward.

He fires & flips with the whiplash. A crackle of plasma-gold, elbow rocked at the joint, but he runs. They run. Meteor through the groves. Cascading, thrashing, shrieking. They run until their knees swing creaking, their lungs crumple like paper tulips. Then they crawl, back south, to the deserted shed atop a nameless hill where they spent the night before.

I don't know, she chokes inside, squeezing her head. *I don't know what... that was...*

Sleep, is all he can sputter, muster. *Sleep... sleep...*

She refuses. *I'll take first watch*. But an hour later she's slack, torpid upon moldy planks sequined with beetle eggs.

He sits with the gun locked onto the crumbling door. A wind has picked up, scrawling portents into the reeking walls & shaking rime from the gables in glittering falls of stardust. She shivers at his feet. Face eclipsed & creased & quivering. He watches. Nightmare or chimera, she is suspended from the absence, the flesh-eating cold. She is free to truly be.

He does not join her. All through the night he stays vigilant—eyes bared stark, pistol at glinting equilibrium. His stomach wrinkles, violently croaks. The heavens freeze & flash with leather clouds. A storm simmering. He can see them there, the faces. Their tears, the icepoints of sinking stars. He hears their cries, featherlight & cackling, & realizes now they're laughs. And when he glances between her own dim, crinkling face, & the door's weak, quaking frame, he chooses the latter. To stay where he's already been, a dead end. Waiting. Listening, for footsteps, a soft knock in the night. It's the first time he has ever prayed for a closed door. The first time he is afraid to dream.