

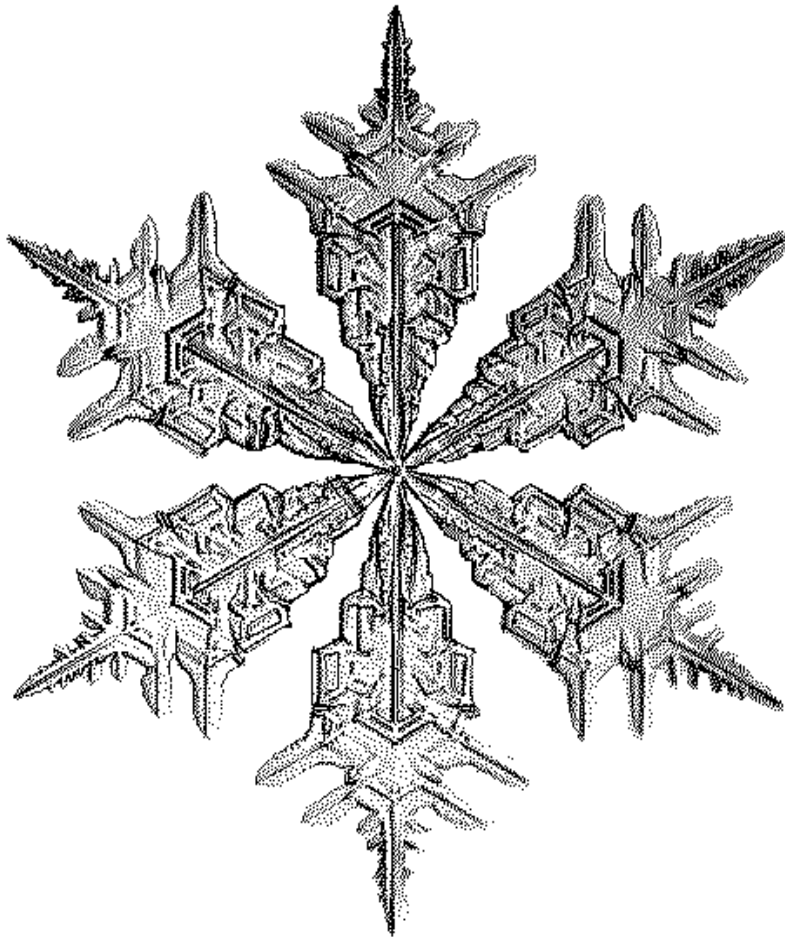
Volume One

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Emerald Tales

A Bimonthly Journal of Short Fiction



Winter Solstice

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Winter's Tale

by
Damien Walters Grintalis

I remember
the way you kissed -

you tasted
like sunrise
and hope.

I wanted too much,
and you walked
away.

Took my smile
with your warmth,

left me
with cold letters
scratched on paper

and a snapshot
to hold
when the ice melted
in my eyes.

December Twenty-First

by

Heather Gregson

Claire sat at her dressing table; nervous butterflies danced in her stomach. Idly she picked up lipstick after lipstick. How many of these things did she own? Shaking her head, she reached for Douglas' favorite, Petal Pink. She put the lipstick on and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She wore her long brown hair loose and flowing around her shoulders, the way Douglas liked it. Loose and flowing was in stark contrast to how she usually wore her hair: slicked back and in a tight bun.

As she looked in the mirror, Claire hardly recognized her own reflection. Gone was her usual grim, hard, straight-lipped look. She looked soft, feminine and had a glow that radiated from inside her. She knew where this came from: Douglas. He always made her glow when they were together. He was warm, loving and loved to laugh. When she was with him, Claire laughed from the depths of her soul. But only when she was with him.

The rest of time, it was important to Claire to always keep herself under tight control. She had to: the last thing she ever wanted to be was one of those weepy, overemotional women who wore their heart, and every other emotion they had, on their sleeve. Her clients were like that. God, it took all her self restraint not to lean across her desk and slap them across the face. No, she preferred always remaining calm, controlled, and reserved. Life was much less painful that way. Ice Queen was the not-so-secret nickname her co-workers had given her.

It had taken Claire years to become the successful lawyer she was. Her reputation for cold, calculating, and well-thought-out attacks on her clients' opponents made her well paid, respected, and feared in court. To those who worked with her, she had the exact same demeanor. She never joined in office banter or shared in office parties. She remained, cold, aloof, and unapproachable. She did her job with military precision.

That Claire was nowhere to be seen this night. Tonight, she was Douglas' Claire. The Claire who loved to laugh, tell dumb jokes, and cry at sappy television commercials. She was the Claire who was impetuous and unguarded. In short, she was the person she always wanted to be.

She stood up and walked to the closet. Instead of the usual clicking of high heels, the squeak of sneakers echoed through the bedroom. Claire laughed a little. Douglas was the only person who could get her to wear jeans and sneakers. She wore the pair he liked best. They were faded and missing one back pocket. The pocket had torn off when Douglas grabbed it to stop her from falling while they were ice skating. They both hit the ice with a thud and gales of laughter.

Reaching into the back of the closet, Claire grabbed Douglas' warm leather bomber jacket. She put it on and could still smell the faintest trace of his scent. When she closed her eyes, Claire could feel every touch the two had shared. Her heart raced at the unexpected flood of memories. Had it really been a year since she had last seen him? Of course, it had. Claire had counted every minute of every day since they were last together. December 21 was the last time she had seen her beloved Douglas. And now, exactly one year later, she would see him again.

She zipped up the too big bomber jacket and left her apartment. The doorman did a double take, barely recognizing her. She gifted him with a rare smile. The sun had long since set on this shortest day. It was bone-numbingly cold out, and thus, Claire was afforded the rarity of having the city streets all to herself. Snuggled in the warm bomber jacket, Claire didn't feel the sharp bite of the winter air. In truth, if she were walking naked down the street, she wouldn't have felt the cold. The thought of being with Douglas after so long warmed her from the inside.

As she walked, Claire thought about the life she and Douglas had once shared. They met by chance, five years ago, when he bumped into her as she exited the little café where she bought her morning coffee. She had been nasty, curt, and unsocial, and he had been undeterred. To her surprise, he had followed her to court and waited for her case to finish. His good-natured indifference to her usual waspish demeanor melted her icy indifference, and he saw the Claire that would be waiting for him tonight.

“What are you thinking about?” She stopped abruptly. Claire knew that voice. Her breath caught in her chest as her heart skipped a beat. Douglas. She had been so lost in her memories, Claire hadn't realized she was already at her destination.

“You,” she said and looked at him.

He was every bit as handsome as she remembered. His brown eyes danced with laughter, his black hair as always: tussled and unkempt.

“You left your hair down,” Douglas said, his fingers combing through her windswept tresses.

“You like it down,” she said, her voice sounding strangely husky.

“What do you want to do?” Douglas asked, his eyes never leaving hers.

“It's your night. It's your choice,” she answered.

“Park,” he said and took her hand.

A chill shot up Claire's arm as Douglas took her hand. A chill she loved but never got used to. They walked together, each one's stride matching the other's.

Claire leaned close to Douglas and he inhaled the gentle scent of her perfume. He had carried that scent in his mind for a year. One year. It had been one whole year since they had last touched, or spoken to each other. Neither spoke now, but every feeling they felt for each other seemed to radiate from them.

When they reached the park, Douglas stepped out on to the frozen ice rink.

“Come,” he said and held out his hand. Claire took his hand without hesitation. He pulled her close, and together, they slid across the ice.

“This would probably be easier with skates,” Claire said with a laugh.

“Probably,” Douglas said as he tilted her head back. Claire's eyes blazed with a love and passion he knew so well. He caressed her lips with his and held her as tight as he could. But no matter how tight he held her, Claire could feel the part of Douglas that was always held back. The part of him she could never have.

He slowly released her, but still held tight to her hand.

“Have you met someone else?” Douglas loathed to ask, but did. Tension knotted his muscles.

“Of course I haven’t, and I never will. I’ve already met and fallen in love with the only man I’ll ever love,” Claire answered.

“I’d understand if you did, given the situation,” Douglas said, sounding casual but strained.

“I won’t.” Claire could feel her lawyer self coming to the surface.

The tension seemed to leave Douglas as he rested his head on Claire’s.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“And I love you,” he said into her soft, flowing hair.

They made their way off the ice and sat on one of the benches. Douglas wrapped his arms around Claire, and she dug her nails into the back of his clothes. She was sure if she clung to him tight enough, this night would never end. It was the longest night of the year after all. They sat entwined together for hours. Neither moving. Neither wanting the night to end.

The alarm on Claire’s watch beeped, and both knew their time together was ending.

“Walk with me,” Douglas said, as he stood up.

Claire did as he asked. They slowly walked back, each step weighed down with regret and longing. They arrived back at the cemetery too soon for either of them. The sky was beginning to lighten as the solstice ended.

“I hate being dead,” Douglas said sadly.

“I hate you being dead, too,” Claire said, her voice etched with pain.

“I had so much more I wanted to do. I wanted a lifetime with you. And now, we have just one night a year.”

“I’ll take it,” Claire said, fighting back the tears that filled her eyes. “One night with you is better than a life time with anyone else.”

Douglas kissed her brow, but Claire could scarcely feel his touch. He was fading from her.

“I love you from this life to the next,” Claire said as Douglas turned and walked back into the cemetery. Claire was unable to stop the flood of tears that overwhelmed her as Douglas disappeared. It would be another year until he would be able to return to her. Claire looked at her watch: 524, 880 minutes until she and Douglas were together again.

“From this life to the next,” she heard whispered on the wind. Claire turned and started for home. 524, 879 more minutes to go.

END

Io Saturnalia

by

Cherie Reich

The man's fingers twitched as if they were anxiously writing. With a start, his eyelids popped open. He blinked and stared around him. He was the only one left in the slave quarters, and he sat up quickly. How could he oversleep?

Rubbing his cold, aching fingers, he searched for his clothes. His brown eyes fell upon the *pileus* or freedman's hat. He sighed, and his shoulders sank in relief. He wasn't late. Today was still Saturnalia, and he was free for one more day from his work as a scribe. He dressed calmly and pulled the freedman's hat over his thick, black hair.

He dipped his hands in some cool water and ran them over his olive skin before exiting the slave quarters. He entered the house through the servants' entrance. Gentle warmth brushed against his face and warmed his hands. The fires of Vesta were lit, and he welcomed the goddess of the hearth by her Greek counterpart, Hestia.

He could hear the light rustlings of the other slaves working feverishly for their master and mistress. The Greek slave knew he was lucky to be a scribe on such days when there was no court. The magistrate, Lucius Valerius Corvinus, would likely not need his services on such a festive day as today. Yet the slave knew better than not to check with his master first.

He checked in the *tablinum* for his master, but his master was not in the study. He was about to pass through the *triclinium* when he caught sight of his master reclining on a dining couch. "Io, Saturnalia!" the Greek called in greeting as he entered the dining room.

"Io, Saturnalia, Hermes," Lucius returned the greeting as he motioned the Greek scribe forward. "Have a seat. Would you care for some breakfast?"

Hermes could very well get used to the reversal of roles that ran throughout the holiday. "Some breakfast sounds wonderful, Valerius Corvinus," he commented as he reclined on the dining couch.

Lucius laughed, which made his rotund belly jiggle under his silky blue tunic. He clapped his hands. "Some bread and cheese." He glanced around in a conspiring manner. "And some of that leftover wine...watered down, of course." He chuckled. "I would rather Cornelia not know. She hates when I choose to eat breakfast. If I have to hear one more time how her uncle would take nothing more than that heated vinegar drink for breakfast..." He allowed the idea to fizzle out. It was clear to Hermes that Valerius would do nothing when it came to his beloved Cornelia.

A young, fair-haired Gaul entered carrying a tray of food. With ease, she sat down the tray, bowed, and returned to the kitchen.

Lucius took up the bread and awkwardly served some to Hermes.

"Thank you," Hermes commented. A wry grin pursed his lips. "If your slaves worked as hard as their master, nothing would ever get done around here," he teased.

For a brief second, Lucius frowned, causing a deep line to crease his forehead, but the frown turned into a smile. The Roman laughed merrily and almost spilled some wine that he was mixing with water. "That is a good one, Hermes. I will have to remember it to tell my friends in the Senate."

Hermes smiled before tearing off a chunk of bread, pressing a slice of cheese against it, and popping the entire thing in his mouth. He washed it down with the watered-down wine. "Do you need my services today?" he inquired.

Lucius drank some wine. "No, not today, Hermes." The master studied his servant for a moment, and Hermes squirmed on the couch. "You enjoy wearing the *pileus*, no?" he inquired as he motioned to the hat on Hermes' head. Lucius was sporting a freedman's hat as well, as all Romans did for Saturnalia.

Hermes chewed another bite of bread as he considered his response. "I enjoy serving under you, *Domine*, but I do remember a time when I was free in my home country." He touched the fabric of the hat. "I would not mind wearing this hat beyond Saturnalia, if it pleases my master."

The Roman gave a slight nod. "You have served me well as a scribe. I have been considering what to do with you, Hermes. How old are you?"

"I am thirty years this past summer."

"Thirty. A fine time for a man to begin his life. I took Cornelia to wed at thirty." He smiled fondly as he thought of his wife. His gaze fell upon the Greek. "I paid 2,250 *sestertii* for you, since you could read and write both Greek and Latin." He shifted in his seat as he grew serious. "You have been with me how long?"

"Seven years, *Domine*." Hermes inwardly shivered as he thought of the circumstances of how he became a slave. He was captured by pirates on his way to Rhodes from Athens. He was sold into slavery, but, by the powers of Zeus, he was bought by Lucius Valerius Corvinus.

"You can buy your freedom. If you come up with 700 *sestertii*, I will manumit you." Lucius smiled. "You can start out as a freedman. Instead of being my slave, you will be my client. I believe you will make a fine client for me, Hermes."

"You will make a fine patron, Valerius." Hermes did not know how he would come up with the money, though. In his past seven years, he had only saved a third of that amount. He would likely die before he would accumulate such a lofty sum.

With some effort the heavy man rose from the dining couch. "Wait here," he told the slave. He left for a few moments and returned with a small bag. "Take this, Hermes. It is my gift to you."

"You have already given me my Saturnalia gift," Hermes reminded him.

Lucius took the slave's hand and placed the bag in it. "Take it." Once again, he glanced around and then whispered, "Gambling is allowed during Saturnalia. I do not suggest using all the money for such a purpose, but you could win a little bit. Use the gift as you will, though." He stepped away from the Greek. "Go on now, Hermes. Enjoy this fine day." He waved his ringed hand, dismissing the slave.

Surprised at his new fortune, Hermes took the bag and tucked it into his belt. He did not waste time as he left.



The streets of Rome were swarmed with people. Despite the winter chill, no one hurried. Saturnalia's greetings were thrown to each passerby. Everyone wore the freedman's hat, and each person wore colorful, informal robes. There was not a single crisp white toga in sight. The only tell-tale signs of rank were distinguished in the fabrics worn, as well as, the few who did choose to ride in a litter instead of walk.

Despite the festive atmosphere, the pale day's light cast deep shadows among the streets. Hermes rubbed his hands against the chill as he headed towards the *sigillaria*, or special market. He knew that he had no coins to spare, if he would like to buy his freedom any time soon, but he wanted to enjoy the music and people.

He breathed in the cool air and smiled. His back straightened, and he raised his head. This was what it would feel like to be a freedman. He could come and go as he pleased, within reason. He would still hold allegiance to Valerius, and he would be expected to enact his client duties as his patron commanded. He would be free, though. He could marry. Although he could not hold office, his children would be Roman citizens, and there was nothing greater in these times.

Street traffic slowed to the pace of a turtle as Hermes neared the market. The slave was thin and limber, and he swiftly began to move through the small openings that parted amongst the crowd. As he entered the marketplace, he was almost knocked backwards by the assault on his senses.

A sea of people and vendor stalls surrounded him. The jabbering of all languages, a cacophony of different musical instruments, the hawking of goods, and the growls, shrieks, and hisses of exotic animals filled his ears. Roasting meats, heavy stews, fresh bread, sweets, and wine struck his nostrils and caused his mouth to water, despite having breakfasted not more than an hour before. The air felt warmer in the *sigillaria* as well from the bodies pressed against each other.

The Greek scribe wove his way through the crowd, clutching his coin purse to his side for fear of thieves. Several times, an item was shoved in front of his face, and he shook his head and gave a wary smile to say he wasn't interested. It seemed that everything from all over the world was in this special market. He saw ripe fruits from the Levant. Exotic silks and spices from the East filled several stalls. An African leopard in a cage reached out his deadly claws towards him, and he jumped backwards. The leopard's keeper laughed and fed the beast some meat.

Hermes pressed forward towards a vendor selling hot spiced wine. He sipped the cup as the heat warmed his fingers. Several times, he saw a woman of Venus take the hand of some man and lead him into one of the various buildings. He considered using a bit of the money for such services, but he thought against it, since he needed to save every coin for his freedom. The sheer thought actually made his cheeks blush. He had just finished the wine when he saw a slender arm beckon towards him from a tent. He glanced around, wondering whom the woman was seeking. A perfectly manicured nail pointed straight at him and curled towards her owner. The Greek pointed to himself. "Me?" he inquired in a soft whisper that surely the woman wouldn't be able to hear.

The finger beckoned again as a soft tinkling sound of her arm bangles jingled together. "Come, Hermes," a warm, female voice whispered directly in his ear.

He shivered, despite having just drunk the heated wine. He turned around in a circle, not seeing from where the voice had come. The hand began to disappear beyond the folds of the tent, and unconsciously, the slave was pulled toward it. With a last minute of hesitation, he lifted the flap and entered the tent.

A thick heat embraced him as soon as the flap of the tent fell from his hand. A hazy perfume circled around him, drawing him closer to the woman sitting in front of a small table. "Sit," the husky voice commanded. Like a puppet being released from its strings, the scribe collapsed into the chair.

The woman was illuminated by a single flickering candle, and Hermes found that he could not tell whether she was young or old. Her dark eyes were fathomless and burned in the dim light. Her hair was thick and black, and Hermes thought that she had Etruscan features. Her hands moved rapidly as the bracelets clanked together.

"I don't want my future told," the Greek blurted out as he realized that she was placing three cards upon the table.

The fortuneteller glanced up at him. "It is an interesting future." Her voice lowered. "It contains the keys to your freedom."

The man trembled, yet she had him hooked. He attempted to take a deep breath, but the heavy incense in the room prevented it. He coughed. "I thought the Censors did not appreciate fortunetellers within the city."

The woman laughed, flashing her strong, white teeth. "It is the holidays. The Censors' laws are lax." Her gaze caught hold of him. "Do you want to know what the Fates have in store for you, Hermes the Greek?"

The brief smile that pursed his lips fell when she mentioned his name. Was she more than a fortuneteller? Could this Etruscan woman be a witch? He swallowed a lump in his throat. He resisted the urge to look away. He wanted to flee, but the slave was stuck to his chair. He gave the slightest nod in acquiescence.

"Very well." She studied the cards and smiled. "Great fortune is coming to you. I see you wearing the *pileus* on your deathbed." She motioned to the freedman's hat. "The Fates guarantee your freedom." She moved and reached for four small off-white pieces that Hermes recognized as knucklebones. "Your fortune involves these sheep bones. They are yours for a single copper as."

Hermes blinked and felt her spell breaking over him. He knew when he was getting swindled. He wasn't stupid. "I don't think so. I don't have an as to spare."

Her eyebrow arched quizzically. "Without these, it will take years for you to gain your freedom, but if that is what you wish." She moved to put the knucklebones away.

The scribe bit his lower lip in thought. "A copper as? Right?"

"Yes."

He reached into his coin purse and pulled out the small copper coin. "I suppose I'll take them." Logically, he reasoned that they wouldn't work, but he was too superstitious and eager to be free not to buy them.

She took the copper coin and placed the four knucklebones in his hand. Before he could retract it, though, she grasped his wrist. He yanked it towards him, but her strength imprisoned him in her clutches. "But be warned, Hermes the Greek. These bones will grant your freedom, but if you use them for more than just your freedom, the Fates turn dark and ominous for you. Do you understand?"

The Greek struggled against her vise-like grip. His eyes met hers, and he quivered like a leaf in a storm. "I understand. I understand." She released him, and he tumbled backwards, nearly knocking the chair over. He stumbled to his feet and ran out of the tent. An eerie laughter followed him, followed by the greeting, "Io, Saturnalia."

The cold air outside brought him back to his senses, and he cleared his head with the familiar scents of the marketplace. His feet took him towards home, but he paused just outside the *sigillaria*. Perhaps the wine had given him a waking dream. He opened his left hand, finding the knucklebones there. The witch was real, and he shuddered. Raising his left hand, he made to toss the bones away, but he couldn't find the strength to get rid of them. They could mean his freedom. He brought his hand to his chest and began walking again. He would not return home, for he did know that he could find a place where he could put these knucklebones to good use. Perhaps he would be manumitted tonight!



"Place your bets!" cried a masculine voice as other men placed coins on the table. The small room was brimming over with people and wine. Several groups of people were throwing down coins, knucklebones, or dice as the gamblers were worked into a frenzy. The room was thick with the scent of men, wine, money, and greed.

Hermes placed down his bet and rubbed the small bones between his hands. He tossed them and watched as they landed on the table.

"Twenty-four again. Your luck seems to be changing for the better, Hermes," one man commented as the four other men took their turns.

"You haven't gotten a single Dog since your third throw," another man stated begrudgingly as he threw a Dog, which was one point for each knucklebone. "Four for me," he growled and gulped down some wine. The purple liquid dribbled down his chin and into his beard.

Hermes shrugged as he won the bet. "I suppose my luck is changing." When he first started playing, he had terrible throws of ones and twos. He was throwing many fours and sixes now. Perhaps these knucklebones were lucky. As he took his winnings, he counted them up. From this bet alone, he had gained thirty sestertii. He pocketed the coins and considered his previous winnings. He had been to five other places before this one. The weakened winter's light had faded into the extremely long night by the time he had reached this establishment. His eyes widened as he realized that he had won seven hundred sestertii tonight. He had his freedom. He

picked up his knucklebones and stared at them. They had won him all of that money. They truly were magical.

“Are you going to continue playing? I’d like to win my money back,” said the bearded fellow.

The fortuneteller’s warning rang in his ears. He knew that he should leave with his winnings. He had won his freedom. It was what he desired. His right hand touched the heavy sack of coins attached to his belt. “Maybe I should call it a night.”

“Oh, come on! It’s Saturnalia! You won’t be able to gamble like this for another year,” a thin man exclaimed.

The bearded one shoved a cup of unwatered wine into Hermes’s hand. “One more round,” he suggested.

Hermes took the wine and drank half of it as he considered the possibilities. He had what he wanted, but the thought of more money was terribly tempting to the slave. He could do so much good if he had more money. He would get married and have enough money for a place to live. He could perhaps open up his own school. The heavens knew that the Romans needed a good Greek education! His cheeks flushed from the wine as he finished the cup. “A few more games, perhaps.” A cheer went up from the men, and the bets were placed down as the knucklebones rolled.



Hermes stumbled down the quiet, darkened Roman streets. His bag of coins was filled almost to the breaking point. He ended up taking home 1,300 sestertii, six hundred more than necessary for his liberty. He was a wealthy man and would soon be a free one, as well. He stopped walking for a moment as he tried to regain his bearings. The man swayed drunkenly back and forth. A hiccup burst through his lips, and he laughed.

Not a glimmer of pale winter’s light shown anywhere as a thick, cold darkness had descended upon the city. Without a torch and being a tad inebriated, Hermes was lost. “I think I’ll go this way,” he said aloud as he turned to his left and began his drunken amble again.

The cool air seeped into his wine-induced fogged brain, but he didn’t seem to sober up much until he heard a noise above his head. He twisted to the side and barely regained his balance as a splashing sound shattered the quiet on the street. His nose wrinkled in disgust as he smelled urine and feces. He had just missed taking a dreadful chamber pot bath. His step quickened as he remained in the center of the street to avoid such an occurrence again.

Despite being sober, he still had no clue where he was. The labyrinthine maze of Rome’s streets and back alleys was confusing to the seasoned Roman. A simple Greek scribe had no chance. His brown eyes searched in the darkness for any recognition of a place. If he could reach the forum, he might have a chance to find his way home.

He placed one sandaled-foot in front of the other. He turned left and right down so many paths. One turn led him into an alleyway, where he saw three men standing. His lips parted as he was going to ask for directions, but the words died on his tongue. They were no more

distinguished than shadows, but they appeared large and sinister to the slave. He backed out of the alley and continued on his way.

The heavy bag at his hip clinked conspicuously as he hurried down the street. Footsteps came from behind him, but he didn't look back. From a brisk walk, he began to jog. The men behind him also increased their pace. He could hear their feet slapping against the pavement. This time, the Greek couldn't help but glance backwards. A startled cry of fear shattered from his lips. He clutched the bag on his side as he broke out into an awkward run.

His heart pounded in his chest to the same rhythm as his feet. He turned left down another street. A glimmer of recognition gave him hope. He was very close to his master's home. As he released his hold of the bag, his arms pumped at his sides. The heavy coins thumped against his hip. Unlike the god he was named after, this slave did not have Hermes' famous winged sandals. He was no runner, and the heavy bag threw off his balance, yet he refused to ditch the bag of coins. As he tried to make a sharp turn, he stumbled and cried out as he fell.

The three men caught up with him and grabbed him. His head knocked against the road, and bright stars spun in front of his vision. He kicked out, knocking his foot against one of them. He bit another's hand as he scrambled back to his feet.

"Help!" Hermes pleaded as another one grabbed hold of his money bag. He lost his balance, and the full bag ripped, spilling a stream of gold, copper, and silver onto the ground. The slave turned towards his money as something cold ripped through his abdomen. A sickening suction noise fell against his ears as a bloody dagger was pulled from him. The man holding the blade plunged it in again, and Hermes moaned. Hot blood poured from the wounds and instantly chilled him. He collapsed to his knees so hard that they bruised. The dagger and the men left him as they gathered as many fallen coins as they could.

Hermes lay on his side as he curled into a fetal position. Blood seeped from the two gaping gashes. A chilling breeze brushed against the slave and his attackers, and he wasn't the only one that shivered. The air changed. The shadows seemed to move, and the fiends stood up abruptly. Making signs to ward off evil, the three fled the scene.

"Help," Hermes whispered weakly. As the blood drained from him, his complexion grew paler. His vision swam in and out of consciousness as a woman appeared before him.

"The Fates warned you," the woman's husky voice condemned him like a Greek fury. His body convulsed as she stepped around the sticky, blackened puddle. The clanking of coins produced a cacophony to his ears. He turned his head, spotting the four knucklebones just inches away from his face. His bloodied hand reached towards them, and even though Hermes was near death, he knew that they had fallen as sixes. The Etruscan witch deftly scooped up the sheep bones in one fell swoop. His fingers almost touched the hem of her dress as she moved away from him. "You were warned, Hermes the Greek."

His breathing became labored as he reached out towards her. "Please," he croaked out wetly.

As his hand fell limply to his side and his last breath shuddered from his chest, the witch turned towards him. She tossed the knucklebones in the air and caught them. "Io, Saturnalia," she whispered. With a couple of steps, she melted within the shadows; all that was left was the eerie echo of her cackling laughter.

END

A Not So Scary Solstice

by

Guy Belleranti

As the year's shortest day
became the year's longest night
Sidney Scared-of-the-Dark
began to feel a big fright.

So he packed up his bags
and flew away out of sight
landing at the South Pole
where it was summer and light.

Crisis Line

by

Heather Parker

"Sure you're okay, Sarah? " asked Mary, disturbed by the girl's description of her call. "Do you want to talk about it? "

Sarah shook her head. "I've taken plenty of weird calls over the years. I'm not sure why this one got to me. It was as if he knew me somehow. "

Mary nodded sympathetically. "They listen and pick up the smallest details. "

Both women were experienced volunteers, and they were accustomed to the hoaxers and heavy breathers. That wasn't to say they liked them. They were just a sad fact of life.

"Well, get yourself home before the snow starts to settle. You've a long drive ahead, and those roads are lonely at night. "

Although there were over fifty volunteers at the Centre, the two women always worked their shift together, and Mary tended to mother the girl.

"I'm going." Sarah grinned. "I've got no desire to get stuck tonight. Mark's got a bottle of wine and a video waiting when I get home. "

"Have a nice night, love. "



The snow was getting heavier, and Sarah could see it settling on the road. She pulled the keys out of her pocket and headed for the small red car. She was still edgy, and she felt an irrational sense of relief as she got in and locked all the doors. It was that damned caller.

The man, he called himself Simon, seemed genuine enough at first, and she felt sorry for him. He told her his wife, Carol, had left him this morning, and he felt there was nothing left to live for. They talked for an hour, and Sarah felt she was really getting through to him. She had to admit it was rare. She tried hard to help everyone she talked to, but it didn't always work, and she often finished a shift feeling frustrated and helpless. She sighed and started the long drive back to her isolated home. Perhaps that was why she'd broken her own rules and told him her name. That was when he changed. His voice became perceptibly stronger, and she sensed he might not be as upset as he pretended. He began to probe deeper into her life, and she found herself on the defensive.

As her training and experience suggested, Sarah tried to bring the call to an end. She didn't want to misjudge this man, and she was kind. But she didn't want to encourage another sexual caller to haunt the volunteers and block the lines, either. She was relieved when seven o'clock

arrived, and she could say, quite honestly, her shift had finished and she had to go home. It was then he really began to frighten her.

He spoke quietly and told her he would kill himself if she left him tonight. Strangely Sarah was used to this. It had happened before, and volunteers were taught how to handle the situation. She talked calmly to him for a while and suggested he talk to another volunteer. He laughed at that idea and told her he didn't want some nosy bastard prying into his life.

"I just want you, " he whispered. "And I'll have you. You're not going to leave me, Sarah. My wife regretted it, and you will, too. "

Sarah shivered and turned the heater up as she peered through the windscreen. In spite of the snow, the night was so dark. It was a relief when she turned into the lane leading to their cottage. Another four miles, and she'd be home. She gripped the wheel tightly as the car slewed suddenly on a bend. The VW bumped over the snowy verge, and she noticed the headlights in her mirror. At least, if she got stuck now, she'd have some help. The lights got closer, and she glanced at her watch. It was almost nine o'clock, so she fiddled with the radio and turned on the news.

The pleasant voice of the newsreader announced the time on the hour and continued with the local headlines. "The police have issued a warning to the public tonight, following the discovery of a woman's body in Hazlemere. The woman has been identified as forty-year-old Carol Menzies, a psychiatric nurse at Moreton hospital. Police say she died of multiple stab wounds to the chest, following what must have been a frenzied attack. They are asking her husband, Simon Menzies, to come forward so they can rule him out of their enquiries. At present, his whereabouts are unknown, but he is known to have suffered serious mental problems in the past, and police have warned the public to be vigilant."

Sarah was so shocked by the broadcast, she couldn't think straight. Could it be him? He said his name was Simon and his wife was Carol. He even suspected she was having an affair with someone at the hospital. But had his wife left him, or had he killed her? She tried to stay calm. Like all the volunteers, she was bound to secrecy, but was it right to keep quiet in a case like this? She honestly didn't know. It was a dilemma you knew was a possibility, but never believed you'd have to face.

The small car lurched as it hit another drift of snow and lost momentum as she approached the hill. She tried to concentrate on her driving and forced the gear lever into bottom.

"Come on, Polly," she muttered, using the pet name.

But it was too steep and too snowy for Polly to stand a chance. Sarah slammed her hands on the steering wheel and screamed in frustration. She had to put Simon out of her mind and try to get home. She didn't want to walk the last two miles, but she couldn't stay here. She suddenly remembered the other car. Looking in her mirror, she could see no sign, and she was confused. There weren't any turnings off this road. Where could it have gone? She shrugged and started to pull on her anorak and mittens. Perhaps the driver ran into trouble on that last hill.

The cold air hit her as she stepped onto the icy road, and she switched on her torch. The snow was falling so heavily now she could hardly see anything ahead of her. The night seemed extraordinarily quiet, and she walked as quickly as she dared, her mind still in turmoil over the call. She had no idea what she should do.

She heard a rustle somewhere in the woods and shivered. Mustn't start imagining things, she thought, increasing her speed. She didn't have a nervous disposition, but she wasn't herself tonight. A twig cracked sharply, and she stopped to listen. She knew she was being neurotic, and it was almost certainly a fox or deer blundering through the snow to reach shelter. After all, she had nothing to fear from Simon. He may have threatened her, but she certainly hadn't told him where she lived.

She trudged on and found herself wondering what had happened to the second car. Sarah stopped as something struck her. She hadn't told Simon where she lived, but he probably knew where the Centre was, and he certainly knew what time she was leaving. What if he were close by or even ringing from a mobile outside? It never occurred to her just how easy it would be for anyone to follow her.

She shook herself, and snow scattered everywhere. She mustn't give in to this. She was behaving like a frightened schoolgirl, when there was nothing here to threaten her. Another twig snapped and with it, Sarah's nerves. She set off faster this time, cursing the darkness. Was that a light? For a moment, Sarah's heart stopped. She instinctively switched off her torch and peered into the wilderness, certain she'd seen a flicker, but she didn't know what to do. Should she call out - or try to get home through the woods? Fear made the decision for her, and she crept into the trees, painfully aware of every sound and hoping the snow would muffle it.

"Is anyone there?"

Sarah heard the question, but the man's voice was distorted by distance and the weather.

"Why won't you answer me? My car got stuck in the snow, and I don't know this area."

There was a silence.

"I know there's someone there. I saw your car."

Sarah drew in her breath. Did that sound like a threat? She started to move away, but she tripped over a stone and fell awkwardly. She thought the voice sounded familiar.

"I need you to help me! I'm worried about my wife."

The man was shouting, and Sarah shuddered as she pulled herself up.

She realised, with horror, she'd dropped her torch. She scrabbled hopelessly in the snow, but the man's voice got closer.

"Why won't you talk to me? I need help. My mobile won't work."

So he did have a mobile, thought Sarah, becoming ever more certain the disembodied voice belonged to Simon. She remembered the warning from the police, and she began to run blindly. But he followed her, still shouting. Did he call her name? She stumbled heedlessly into the darkness, filled with an instinctive terror, and never saw the root that caught her foot and plummeted her, head first, into the unyielding beech.



"She's coming round," said a voice as Sarah opened her eyes and looked into the face of a stranger. She was bewildered until Mark appeared and put his hand to her cheek.

"Thank God for that," he murmured, almost as pale as his wife. "Will she be all right, or does she need an ambulance?"

The other man shook his head. "She's got a nasty bump, but there's no sign of concussion. I would just make sure she stays warm and let her rest."

"Mark?" asked Sarah, still reassuring herself she was really safe in her own home.

"Relax, Sarah, you're going to be fine. You fell in the woods and bumped your head, just as I was coming to look for you in Bill's Landrover. Fortunately for us, this gentleman's car also got stuck, and he's a doctor. He's the locum at Hazlemere while Doctor Wilkins is in hospital."

"You were the man calling me?" asked Sarah weakly.

"Yes." The elderly doctor smiled. "But I think I may have scared you, and I apologise for that. I was completely lost, and my wife is unwell at the moment. I'm afraid I may have panicked a little."

Sarah shook her head. "Oh no, it was me who did that. I let my imagination run away with me out there."

She stopped. "But how will you get home?"

"Bill offered to drive him back, and we'll sort out the car situation tomorrow when it's light," said Mark.

The doctor got to his feet and headed towards the door where the local farmer was waiting.

"Thank you," said Sarah, lifting her hand.

The men waved back and made their way out into the blizzard.

Sarah lay back and began to tell him everything that had happened. Her story was interrupted almost immediately by the telephone, and Mark got up and went through to the hall to answer it. She relaxed on the settee and gazed at the warm, comforting fire. Should she tell someone about Simon, or was she being ridiculous? The door opened, and her husband came back into the room. She knew from his face something was wrong.

"Who was that? Mark, what's happened? "

She tried to stand, but her head hurt. He sat on the edge of the settee and took her hand in his.

"I'm sorry, Sarah. That was the police. Something happened tonight - at the Centre."

Sarah started to speak, but Mark hurried on.

"Apparently Mary left soon after you. She can't have had her car tonight. "

Sarah broke in. "No, she didn't, because of the snow. She was going to get the bus. Why? "

Mark swallowed and continued. "A woman was waiting at the bus stop, and she saw a blue Renault pull into the space outside the Centre a few minutes after you drove away. A man got out and waited by the gate. When Mary came out, she said he grabbed her and pushed her to the ground."

Mark's voice wavered, and he closed his eyes for a moment.

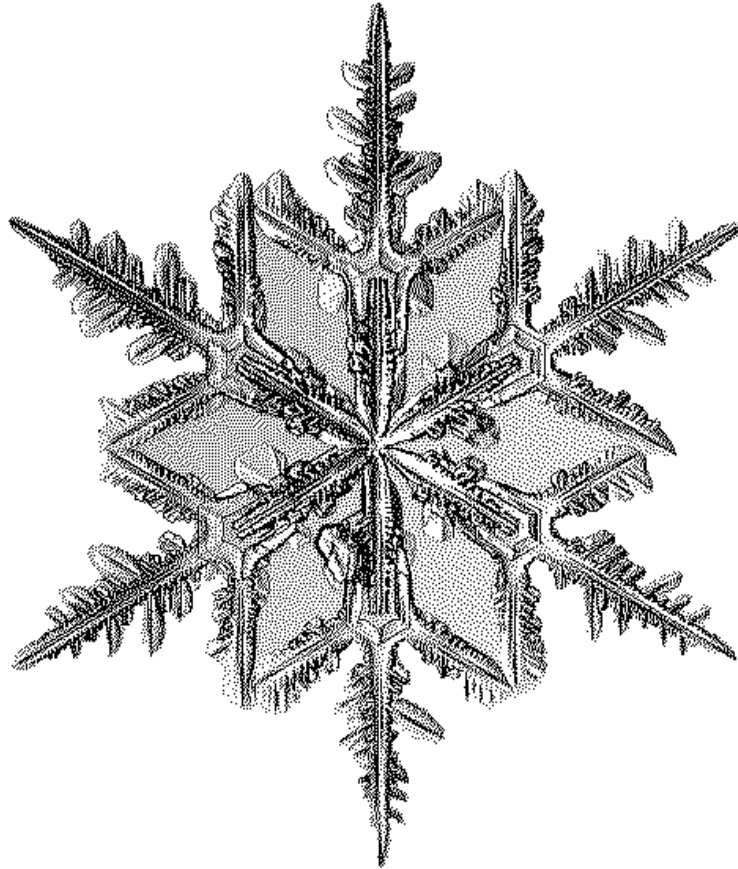
"He pulled a knife from his jacket, and he stabbed her. The woman couldn't get help in time."

Mark trailed off, suffering as he saw the anguish in his wife's face.

He didn't know how else to tell her.

"She's dead, Sarah. The police have no idea why anyone would want to hurt Mary - so they rang here to talk to you. Did anything unusual happen during your shift tonight?"

END



The Gift

by

Bruce Golden

Everyone was there: Aunt Gertie; Uncle Roy; the cousins from Chicago whose names I could never remember; the triplets, Pat, Pam, and Priscilla, whose names I could remember but never knew which was which; even great-uncle Bob—they were all there. Them and more that I had never even heard of.

It was 1969. The country was still recovering from a pair of shocking assassinations; young men were being torn from their loved ones and sent to Southeast Asia to die, and man had just set foot on the moon.

I knew about Neil Armstrong's one small step, but I was too young to think about much else but myself—especially on that day my entire family gathered at Grandpa and Grandma Easterly's ranch outside of Winslow, Arizona. I didn't recognize half the faces, but my mom said they were all relatives in one way or another.

I thought of them all as ducks congregating to quack at the same pond. The idea made me laugh—especially when I pictured Aunt Gertie waddling like one. Of course, I was just a little kid at the time—one with a notoriously wild imagination.

The big family reunion had been called to celebrate two birthdays—both of which fell on December 21st. The truth was the big to-do was really only for one special birthday. Great Grandpa Easterly—Gramp Jack I liked to call him—was celebrating his 100th birthday. That was the real reason why my mom and dad had driven all the way from San Diego, and why the rest had flown in from all over the country, including Hawaii where second (or was it third?) cousin Bill lived. And even though it was also my birthday, eight years wasn't much when compared to a hundred. I didn't know it then, but it was also the Winter Solstice. I only realized that years later and figured it must have had something to do with what happened.

I didn't care that everyone was fussing over Gramp Jack instead of me. That just meant more time to play. Not that I had anyone to play with. I was the only kid—if you didn't count cousins Amy and Erin, who were just babies and no fun to play with. Everybody else was a teenager or grownup, and I didn't see much difference.

So as soon as we finished lunch and unwrapped all the gifts, I wandered off into the neat trees that grew all around the ranch. I grew bored listening to old family stories, and besides, my mom kept telling me to, "stop making all that racket." The racket being caused by my favorite birthday present, the one Gramp Jack gave me.

It was the kind of battery-powered toy machine gun they had back then that shot sparks and fired off half a dozen caps every time you pulled the trigger. It was shiny black, plastic smooth, and fit right in my hands. It was just what I had wanted. That and the skateboard my mom and dad had got me. But a skateboard wasn't much good on a ranch.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Another evil alien invader appeared from around a tree and met his doom. I moved deeper into the off-world jungle of my imagination, stalking creatures with one eye and four arms. Each time I wheeled and aimed the toy weapon, there was another one— *rat-tat-tat-tat!*

I felt a little guilty that I hadn't gotten Gramp Jack anything for his birthday. But nobody had told me to, and besides, Mom and Dad had put my name on their present, so that was from me, too.

I sprang from my hiding place, hit the dirt sliding on my belly, rolled across the ground, and came up firing. *Rat-tat-tat*—it jammed! I unlocked the clip and pulled it out. Nope, it wasn't jammed, I was just out of ammo. I pulled a spare roll of caps from my pocket and sat—calling for a temporary truce with the enemy.

Now how had Gramp Jack put that in? I fiddled unsuccessfully with the roll, trying to feed it into the tiny slot so it could get started. Darn! Why hadn't I paid attention when Gramp Jack had showed me? Stupid thing!

My fiddling led to frustration and I kicked at the ground. The kick sent a stone flying into one of the many small ravines lacing the woods, and the echo of its fall came back to me. But the echo seemed to go on and on, as if coming from farther away. It was then I realized I was hearing something else. Something that sounded like distant screams. Not like calls for help, but wild, threatening screams like. . . like a bunch of Indians. I listened some more until I was sure. I'd seen enough old movies to know the cries of an Indian war party when I heard them.

I closed the machine gun, still in disrepair, and stood. The sounds were getting louder, coming closer. I heard the sounds of horses and gun shots, and that was all I needed to hear. I started running as fast as my size three tennies would carry me. I ran straight for the ranch house. But where was it?

The rush of adrenaline had left me confused. I was no longer sure in which direction it stood. I had gone so far into the forest, I couldn't see it anymore. Panic fueled the pumping of my little legs. The war cries were right behind me. I could hear the pounding of hooves. I didn't dare look back. I just ran, clutching my birthday present, unwilling, even in that moment of terror, to abandon it.

When it seemed I was so scared I'd swallow my own tongue, I broke through the trees and saw the ranch house. I didn't stop, even though the sounds of pursuit had faded. I didn't stop until I burst through a throng of relatives most impolitely and was corralled by my mother.

"Matthew! What are you doing?" she said angrily. "Quit running around like a wild—"

"Indians!" I had caught my breath and didn't hesitate to interrupt. "Indians . . . they're coming!"

Most of the family members standing nearby smiled and laughed, and remarked on little Matthew's Hollywood potential.

"Matthew, I don't want you running around people like that. You're going to knock someone over. Now, if you can't play nice—"

"But really, Mom, there *were* Indians! I heard them and they chased me and—"

"All right, that's enough, Matthew Easterly. I don't care if it is your birthday. If you can't behave, you'll have to go sit in the house."

I started to say something else, but one look at my mother told me it was useless. I looked back toward the forest. There was nothing there. I listened, but didn't hear anything.

"That boy has such a vivid imagination, sometimes I don't know what I'm going to do with him," said my mother to whomever. Then she turned to my dad. "I don't know why your grandfather had to buy him the noisiest toy in the store."

My dad shrugged his shoulders and turned to me.

"It was probably just the wind you heard, Matt," he said, putting his arm around me. "The wind can make some awfully strange noises blowing through those trees. I know, I played in those woods when I was a boy."

"But, Dad, there were gunshots and war cries and horses and—"

"Matthew." It was the stern voice of Gramp Jack that stopped me. The old man was sitting in his favorite rocker, on the porch of what used to be the hired help's bunkhouse. It was his little cottage now. "Come here, boy."

My dad smiled and gave me a gentle boost in Gramp Jack's direction. He motioned for me to sit on the porch.

"Boy, did I ever tell you the story 'bout how my folks—your great-great-grandparents—was killed by injuns?"

I shook my head.

"Didn't think so," said Gramp Jack, tapping his new birthday pipe against the railing to free the ashes. "Well, listen up.

"My folks was headed for Californee in a small wagon train out of Texas. I was 'bout four at the time and dumb as a three-legged jackass. Well, the wagons had stopped to rest and water the horses, so I'm wanderin' off playin'. It was just over that way not too far." Gramp Jack pointed beyond the woods where I'd been playing. "That's when the injuns hit. I guess they figured we was trespassin' on their land. They came screamin' out of them woods with warpaint streaked 'cross their faces, firin' arrows from horseback like there was no tomorra. Apaches they was, the coldest, bloodiest killers that ever lived."

By then, my eyes were as wide as they could get. From the first mention of Indians, my attention was locked on my great-grandfather's every word.

"My pa and ma, and the others, never had a chance. Every one of them was slaughtered by those red devils. So I never got to Californee. When I was old enough, though, I came right back to this spot and decided this was where I was gonna build my own spread. No injuns was gonna scare me off the land, no sir. Why, I—"

"But how'd you get away from the Indians?"

Gramp Jack leaned back in his rocker and slowly refilled his pipe with tobacco. I waited patiently as he lit the pipe, inhaled, then exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"That's the strange part of the story. As soon as I saw them injuns, I knew I was in trouble—even bein' as dumb as I was. I lit out for the cover of them trees just as fast as I could. But one of them braves saw me and whooped and hollered like he'd found a prize pig. He turned his pony so hard it nearly broke a leg."

“What did you do, Gramp Jack?”

“What did I do? What did I do? Damn, boy, I did what any little brat, dumb or ‘telligent would do. I ran like hell. But you can’t outrun a horse. I made it into them trees and turned around. The injun bearin’ down on me was so fierce lookin’ I froze, starin’ at death thunderin’ towards me. Then, from I-don’t-know-where, this boy—not from the wagon train, mind you, cause I’d never laid eyes on him before—this boy who was a little older than me pops up on the ridge. If it weren’t for that boy in them woods, I wouldn’t be here now, tellin’ you this story.” Gramp Jack laughed at some private joke and added, “I guess you wouldn’t be here neither.”

“What happened then, how did the boy save you?” asked Matthew.

“Well—”

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . . “

Gramp Jack stopped his story as the whole Easterly clan moved in around him, singing. My mom carried the cake, ablaze with what looked liked all 100 candles, and Uncle Roy had his Bell & Howell 8mm camera out, filming the event for posterity. I eased back as the relatives crowded in around their senior member, and wound up being pushed back by sheer force of numbers.

I blocked out the singing and wondered about Gramp Jack’s story—wondered if he’d made it up—wondered if he’d remember to tell me how he got away. I walked off, sat down, and, after a while, figured out how to get the fresh roll of caps into my gun.

“Want some cake, Matt?” my dad asked between mouthfuls.

“Not now, Dad. I want to go play.”

“No cake? I can’t believe it.”

“Dad, when you played in those woods when you were a boy, did you ever hear any Indians?”

“Sure, hundreds of times. I must have killed off a thousand Apache warriors and at least a dozen chiefs in my day. Of course, I had a good imagination—like you do.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed.

I got up, locked my fully loaded clip into the gun, and started back in the direction I had run from earlier. After just a short distance, I slowed, hesitated, and decided to go back. One of my teenage cousins saw me and called out.

“Watch out for those Indians. Just whistle if you need the cavalry.”

I turned back towards the trees, ignoring the chuckles.

Part of me, a big part of me, was afraid to go back into those woods. But another part, fueled by curiosity, thought about discovering something beyond belief. The further I walked—the harder I listened and the less I heard—the more I was convinced that it was just another one of Gramp Jack’s tall tales, and it *was* only the wind like my dad had said. Even if the story was true, that had been almost a hundred years ago.

I tried to remember the sounds I’d heard. They’d been so real. I’d even felt the beat of the horse’s hooves on the ground beneath me. I wished I hadn’t been too afraid to turn and look. Then I would have known for sure.

I tried to picture the Indian warrior Gramp Jack had described. Embellished by my own imagination, I saw a trio of eagle feathers perched above a terrifying red face streaked with black and yellow warpaint. I envisioned a necklace of human bones and bear claws draped over a buckskin vest. I even imagined a savage scream and a stone tomahawk slicing through the air.

I could almost see the—"Ah!"

My daydreaming and a hazardous tree root sent me sprawling and a shower of dirt and rocks flying over the ridge in front of me. I lay there a moment as the echo of falling rocks faded. I got up, dusted myself off, and heard it again. Not the echo, but the screams, the war cries, the gunshots. The sounds were very close and very real.

I jumped up, ready to run, thinking in the same instant no one would believe me again. I stopped in mid-stride and thought about Gramp Jack's story. I thought of the people in the wagon train and the little boy who was Gramp Jack. At the same time, fear tugged at me, pulling me toward the ranch house. But I didn't budge. Something inside me wouldn't let me. Instead, I clutched my plastic machine gun and made sure it was ready to fire. I eased my way over the ridge as the sounds drew closer. All the while, a baseball-sized knot swelled in my throat.

It wasn't until I saw him that the knot dissolved. *Him*—my Indian, complete with warpaint and tomahawk, astride a horse that was galloping towards me. No, not at me, but towards a little boy standing there just below me.

It happened so fast, I didn't know what I was doing. I just reacted—raised my gun and fired.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Sparks flew and twenty caps burst in rapid succession. The horse reared up so hard, the Apache brave was thrown to the ground. The younger boy recovered from his shock, took a look at me, then turned and ran like a scared rabbit.

The horse raced off and I looked to where its rider had landed. The warrior staggered to his feet and looked at me. Our eyes met for only a moment, but the savage fury I saw in that moment hit me like a thunderclap.

I ran. I ran for real—no game, no imaginary enemy. The brave whooped a victory cry upon seeing me flee and gave chase.

I practically flew over the ground, leaping every obstacle, knowing one misstep would be the end of me. All the while, the howls of rage from behind screamed that death was gaining on me.

I wanted to believe that if I reached the edge of the treeline and broke into the open field of the ranch, I would be safe. It wasn't a belief fashioned by reason—it wasn't a moment of reason. I could only hope. But hope couldn't make me run any faster, and I realized my pursuer would be on me before I could reach that sanctuary.

What I did next was pure reflex. I didn't think it out. I couldn't have if I'd wanted to. I stopped, wheeled around, and with my eyes closed as tight as they would go, fired my toy machine gun.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

I squeezed that trigger for all I was worth and tried to imagine pretend bullets tearing into

my savage attacker. Though my finger never let up, a tranquil silence eventually replaced the frenzied *cracking* of the caps. I waited with eyes closed—waited for the end to come. When it didn't, I peeked out from under my eyelids and saw only trees . . . trees and more trees.

When I got back to the ranch house, the party was winding down. Feeling shaken, and older than a mere eight years, I passed through a dispersing flock of relatives towards my great-grandfather. He was still in his rocker on the bunkhouse porch, puffing away on his pipe.

I stopped in front of the porch, but didn't speak. Gramp Jack stared at me for a moment, real serious-like.

"You've been there, haven't you?" he asked.

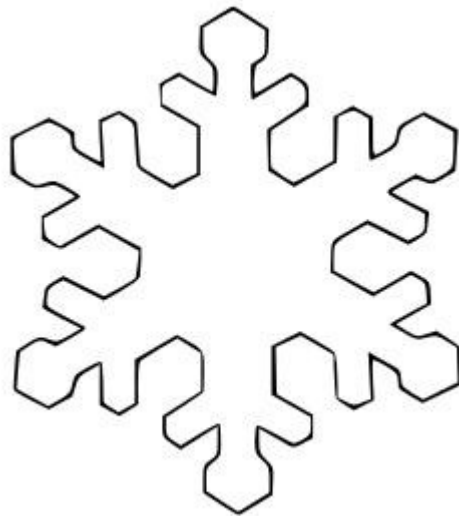
I nodded.

"Then you know the rest of the story, don't you?"

"Yes, Gramp Jack."

"Well, boy," said Gramp Jack, still very serious, "the way I figure it, you gave me the best goldarn gift of the day." The old man smiled as big a smile as someone with that many wrinkles could manage. "Happy birthday, boy, to the both of us."

END



Lonely Snow

by

Lauren McBride

Muffled crunch of warm, booted feet
in deep snow, new-fallen;
each step echoes softly
over the tranquil white carpet.

Icy wind stings my face.
Crisp air numbs my nose -
paints roses on pale winter skin.

Townfolk see my red frozen fingers
snapping pictures out in the snow.
They hurry between warm buildings -
shake their heads wondering,
“Tourist? Photographer?”

No – a lonely student
away at school, determined to capture
fields, trees and stonewalls,
edges blurred beneath
a fresh blanket of snow,
quiet and empty.

I would trade this picturesque scene
for one quick glimpse of home,
or my family nearby
sharing this beauty, walking beside me.

Boots sink with each step,
as I stray from the deserted path
to a snow-covered pond,
pristine, untouched.

I’ll send pictures -
solitary footprints across the snow;
a stately pine, tall and proud
laden with white branches,
sighing in the wind;
alone.

All the Trees That are in the Woods □

by

G. W. Thomas

These events I am about to relate are true. You may scoff, even call me names behind my back, but they happened, happened horribly, changing my life irrevocably. I don't expect you to believe, gentlemen, only listen.

As you all know from my many accounts, I am a Canadian by birth, and I lived my youth in the rough but wholesome style of a Canadian boy. I hauled and split wood for the stove. I fished the lakes for pike and perch, shot grouse and rabbits for meat. The winter was spent trapping beaver and coyotes.

It should be no surprise that a boy of seventeen who spends two months away from home should want to see another face. This longing consumed me worst around the middle of December. The plan was to check the traps one last time then head for the farm where Mother and Father would be preparing a goose, gifts of knitted wool, and a delightful spiced apple cider from the Old Country. I had finished skinning a lynx, two beaver, and a passel of squirrels and was raring to go. I loaded my sled, strapped on my skis, and then left the lonely cabin until the New Year.

The trail home ran past several small lakes and crossed the Simmonette River. On the far side of Duck Lake lived an immigrant family I knew well. My first stop, overnight, was to be the Arnassons'. I had a package of beavertail for Jan and a pair of muskrat mittens for his plump wife, Helgi. For their two girls, I had carved from birch a reindeer and Santa Claus.

I made my way from Cabin Number One, across the first two lakes, rounding the bend in the Simmonette that drained into Duck Lake. The Arnassons' cabin was dark but it had only come on dark at around four o'clock. I hurried across the open ice, anticipating Helgi's rabbit and dumpling stew.

As I pulled up off the ice into the yard, I had expected to hear Sasha, the giant elkhound, bark. His deep-throated rumbling would quickly change to playful romping when he saw me. But no Sasha. □

I pulled off my skis and called to the house. No answer. Were the Arnassons away? Gone to Edmonton for the holidays? No matter. I could stay the night, if I cleaned up after myself. The Christmas presents would be left under the tree.

The Arnassons introduced me to real Old World Christmas trees. Jan brought home the thickest spruce the Alberta hills could produce. He'd spend days in the fall locating his tree c only to return about this time of year to cut it down. Helgi made ornaments of tinsel and baked dough to hang on the bows. Last year, she had given me one of Father Christmas holding a mug of beer. She knew me so well.

I opened the cabin door and stopped cold. The two rooms of interlocking logs were dark, and an evil smell hung over everything. There was a mess on the floor. Wolverine or bear, I

thought. How many times had I told Jan to... The dim light of the setting sun showed me something horrible. A hand.

I rushed in. It was Helgi. On the floor next to the dead woman were her daughters, Brigitta and Christina. All were dead. I searched for Jan but he was not in that mausoleum. What had happened here?

I pulled the overturned bed away from Helgi's corpse. I lit the kerosene lamp, placing it on the hook at the center beam of the cabin ceiling. Its bright yellow light showed me more terror. The beautiful blond woman was purple, swollen in death. I had seen dead men before, stiff with rigor. A drowned Indian lad, and another time, a trapper frozen in a snow bank. This was different. Helgi bore a multitude of small pinpoint wounds. She had been stabbed countless times with a needle!

This wasn't Jan's doing. The powerful Swede would never have hurt his wife or his baby girls. Some other had done this. I dismissed the idea of a native attack. The Cree were peaceful, even friendly. And who would kill in such a grotesque fashion? I doubted my analysis.

Was it a disease? Were these infectious poxes? I had seen small pox, chicken pox, and measles. These wounds were not raised bumps but holes. The blood that had leaked from them was small, but the bloating of the bodies spoke of some strange poison.

I left. I took nothing except the lamp. I hunted up a can of kerosene from the back. I couldn't leave without some attempt to find Jan. He could be injured or in need of help. He might be hunting who ever had done this... or be hunted by him.

I checked my thirty-thirty. I might get only one shot... if bullets were of any use.

Next, I studied the ground and the cabin. I cursed my own sloppy footprints that obscured the tracks closest to the door. I circled farther out and came across a strange trail. A man's footprints. The deep impressions had been scrubbed over by branches in an attempt to cover the footmarks. The job was very poor. The deepest recesses of the feet had been left below the wide swipe of the spruce boughs. The trail was easily followed.

I ran on. The weather threatened snow. I had been happy to make it to Duck Lake before it broke. Now, I prayed it would wait longer. A hard snow would bury my trail in minutes.

The trail followed no sensible direction. It went north then east then north again, avoiding no obstacles but barging on through. Several times, I found marks where a man... Jan, no doubt... had stumbled. I saw no mark of a gun, only an axe. There had been no attempt to wipe away these telltale signs. Jan had fallen, so he must be running. The length of his stride said the same. He ran first; the pursuer with the pine bough followed. It made no sense.

The trail ran straight up the side of Indian Hill, once the site of Cree camps but abandoned for many decades. Occasionally a trapper came across flint arrowheads or an old food cache there. Arnaasson's trapline ran along the lake and then along the creek at the bottom of the hill. He hunted squirrels in the forests above. To where was he running? The railway track that was the only way back to civilization was on the other side of Duck Lake.

It was getting darker. The moon was only a crescent slice in the sky. The snow had begun to fall in earnest. I could see the flakes hit the lamp, hiss, and evaporate. The trail was too wide to

be covered quickly, but I figured I had less than half an hour before it would be completely removed. I ignored the growing cold in my limbs and pressed on.

The snow didn't matter so much as I came to a thicket of aspen. I could see where a man had forced his way through. Only one... not two. The tracks on the ground spoke of a race with two contestants. It still made no sense.

I shoved my way into the brambles. Normally I would have circled around but time was pressing. I wasn't sure how easy it would be to pick up the trail on the other side if I left it.

As I crawled through the two-inch thick saplings, my arm got caught several times. I thought of shading the lamp, but this was foolishness. I needed the light. It was while leafless aspen branches were clawing at my coat, I heard a strange sound. Like a pine tree shaking in the wind. I tried to see what had made the noise, but my lamp was tangled in an aspen. By the time I got the light free and raised, there was nothing to see.

Tales of the Wendigo are common in any part of Canada. I had heard these told by an old Frenchman who fished the big lake up at La Biche. He described the Wendigo as a cross between a man, a bear, and a moose. Such a creature would surely leave a big track, but the Wind Walker left none. Every childhood fear rose up in me in that aspen clump. I thought of turning back. Could I save Arnasson from the Wendigo?

But I tried to imagine myself the next morning in the clear light of day. Even at seventeen years of age, I had no respect for a coward. I had to go on or I'd forever loathe myself.

It took steel nerves to drag myself out of those aspens and continue on the trail. It also took me a moment to see something had changed. The trail no longer bore the tracks of a man, only the branch-swept swath. Where was Jan Arnasson?

I circled as I'd been taught to do by my daddy. I found a second trail, one with Jan's half-buried tracks. This new trail had been laid down just for me, I realized. I was now the hunted.

Again, I thought of turning back. What was this feud to me? Then I recalled Helgi and the girls bloated, stippled faces. What indeed!

I took up the old trail. I wanted to find Jan more than ever, to give him aid if I could. If not, his dead body might offer clues as to what was following me through the falling snow.

The trail went up the slope faster. Jan had climbed the steep incline like a dog, on all fours. I went slower, careful to keep my lamp out of the snow. The tracks left the trees and I was on top of Indian Hill. The wind-swept crown had the look of a gladiatorial ring. I pushed on quickly, following the near-invisible trail over the empty ground and back into the trees on the far side. I was headed down again.

I stopped then, looking at my back trail. The new footprints would be gone in minutes. I watched for some hint of my opponent. Surely, not a man. But what? Nothing showed so I hurried on.

I had no trail to follow now. I just went with the flow of the land. Jan might have been doing that, too, but I doubted it. If he had been fleeing blindly, he'd have run along the creek, never come up the hill. No, something was here. Something important. I had to find it.

What I found was a stretch of thin forest that had been burned by a lightning strike twenty-three years before. Small green conifers pushed up from the ground like fire hydrants. The

process of regrowing had dotted the stretch with small spruce.

Then it struck me. Small trees... the cabin didn't have a Christmas tree. A few gifts scattered amongst the corpses but no tree. Helgi always had her tree up and decorated by mid-December. Christmas was only days away. Someone must have taken their tree.

The sheer insanity of that thought was forced from my mind as I could just make out a man-sized form on the ground ahead. It was covered in snow but I had no doubt now. It was Jan. He was unconscious but not dead. In his hands, he grasped the stump of a freshly cut tree trunk. Of the tree or the axe that had cut it, there was no sign. I shook him. "Jan, Jan, what's going on?" □

He groaned, speaking in Swedish. "Sa trakigt... Helgi..." I leaned closer to hear him better when it hit me from behind.

It attacked with a lightning burst, knocking up snow, blinding me. I hadn't seen it coming. Now that it was on me, I still couldn't make out what it was. My rifle was slung over my shoulder. I tried to pull it off but my assailant pressed me painfully to the ground, jamming a thousand sharp needles into my face. I did the only thing I could. I swung out with the lamp. Glass smashed and the oil lit up my foe in bright yellow flames. There was a soul-searing squeal, followed by a frantic rustling of snow. I pulled away trying to make out what was thrashing to death before me.

It was only then that I saw what had attacked me, what had killed my friends. A tree. A man-sized spruce that twitched and bucked with the energy of a bronco. The needled limbs hacked and tore at an enemy it could not defeat. The flame roared with the nose-biting reek of turpentine. Only as the wood began to turn cherry-red did it lessen its manic rolling. In death, the tree burned as any other would have... to ash.

I figured it was safe now to get Jan and leave. We had no lamp, only each other c as we climbed away from that haunted flame. I had no desire to spend one second in its warmth or light. We stumbled on for a short while then chose a snow bank and dug in.

When morning came, I woke to the feel of a wet tongue on my face. Sasha! The big elkhound had dug into our snow cave. Using his large gray frame, I clawed my way out to see that two feet of snow had fallen that night. It would make for hard going back to the cabin.

It was then I called to Jan. He didn't answer. I looked into the hole. Jan's mouth no longer gave off frosty breath. He was dead. His bruised and frozen body had bloated up like his family's. I buried him beside his wife and children on the edge of Duck Lake. Four graves dug with hot coals and frozen fingers. I reported these to the RCMP the next time I was in Edmonton but nobody ever came to dig up those graves. All for the better, for I have no doubt their questions would not be answered.

As for my own, I think I know what happened. Guesswork and a second visit to that burned stretch of new spruce. Jan had found his perfect Christmas tree, found it in that burn. He'd cut it and taken it home. Only he hadn't known, not as I do now. That burnt area had once been a burial ground. A very special one, reserved for the most powerful of shaman. Each tree marks a grave. Each tree is meant to protect that grave. It sounds ridiculous, I know. Just as tales of the Wendigo might to city-born ears. But I had heard that tree hunt me in the aspen woods; felt its needles attack me. I saw it shake and burn there beside its own stump. And if we can't trust our senses, then what can we trust? Goodnight, gentlemen.

The Making of a Man

by

Raymond Koonce

Vulfgang and Peter crouched behind a row of bushes as they watched the group of men make their way across the cold Elbe River valley. The men were well armed, and they could not determine from this distance if the men were a hunting party or a group of raiders from the North. Villagers were often forming hunting parties these days. The snow had arrived early and lasted well past what was expected over the last two years, and some of the villages were experiencing food shortages due to the shorter growing seasons.

Word had also filtered down from Hamburg that hundreds of Viking ships had come down the Elbe and destroyed the town. This might be some of those raiders looking for more spoils and slaves.

“Who are they, grandpa?” Peter asked.

“I’m not sure. They may be raiders from the North.”

“Will they try to hurt us?” the boy asked.

“Not if we stay hidden. Besides, they may just be men out hunting for their families.”

The elders of Vulfgang’s village, of whom he was one, had foreseen the possible shortage of food and planted half again what would have been their normal crops. In that way, they had managed to harvest enough food to keep them through the long winter. In addition, the men of the village had set traps for small animals to supplement their crops with meat. Vulfgang and his ten-year-old grandson, Peter, were out checking those traps.

As they were watching the men, a fallow deer suddenly came crashing through the forest behind Vulfgang and Peter, pursued by a pack of wolves. The noise drew the attention of the group of men. They turned toward the sound, then started making their way toward the boy and his grandfather.

The men finally got close enough for Vulfgang to see how they were dressed. “Those men are Vikings, Peter. See their helmets?”

“Yes, grandpa. What will we do?”

“We must run. Stay low and try not to make any noise.”

“Back to the village?”

“No! We must not lead them to our people. We will flee in that direction,” he said, pointing to the northeast.

After a few minutes, Peter looked behind them and said, “Look, grandpa, our tracks in the snow. They will know where we are going.”

Just then, they heard a shout. The Vikings had discovered their trail and were following.

“There is a stream just ahead, Peter. We will hide our tracks in the water.”

When they reached the small stream, Vulfgang had them leave tracks veering to the left, so that it would look like they were going upstream. Over the centuries, the stream had cut its way through the sandstone hills, and they had to climb down the bank about thirty feet to reach the water. Once they were in the water, however, he and the boy turned downstream, hoping to confuse their followers.

After wading through the stream for about a mile, they began to hear the Vikings shouting behind them. “They’re coming, grandpa. What will we do?”

Vulfgang’s trick hadn’t fooled the Vikings for long, and they were now in pursuit of the pair. “Move quickly, Peter. We mustn’t let them catch us.”

As they came to a bend in the stream, Vulfgang noticed a cave that storm waters had carved into the sandstone. “There, boy. See the cave? We will hide in there.” He and the boy climbed out of the water and into the cave.

The sounds of the Vikings were getting quite close now. Vulfgang led Peter deeper into the cave, feeling his way through near total blackness. He found a narrow side cut in the cave, and he and the boy squirmed their way into it as far as they could. Then they waited.

“They will almost certainly search this cave, Peter. We must be very quiet when they come. Remember how the rabbit grows very still when he is hiding? We must be like the rabbit.”

Moments later, they heard the sound of someone climbing through the entrance to the cave, and they both became utterly still, barely daring to breathe. From the sound, there were two of the Vikings feeling their way along. They had no torch and were cursing the darkness.

When one of them came to the fissure in which Vulfgang and Peter were hiding, he reached his arm in, but couldn’t quite reach the two. After a moment, he continued on to the back of the cave. Vulfgang couldn’t understand all that they were saying, but he was able to determine that they thought the cave was empty, and after what seemed like hours to the hiding pair, the men finally left to rejoin the rest of the Vikings.

After waiting several minutes more, Vulfgang and Peter came out of their hiding place and carefully made their way toward the cave entrance. “Get down on your belly, Peter. Move slowly and make no noise.”

Night was falling, and so was the snow. The falling snow muffled sounds, but Vulfgang could faintly hear the Vikings as they continued downstream. “Listen, Peter. They are moving away from us, but we will wait a little longer to be sure.”

They waited for another hour, then slowly made their way out of the cave and back into the stream. So that they could make better time returning to the village, they crossed the stream and climbed up the bank. Vulfgang didn’t worry about the tracks they would leave, since the freshly falling snow would soon cover any evidence of their passage.

“We did it, grandpa. The Vikings didn’t find us. Can we go home now?”

Vulfgang was about to answer his grandson when a single Viking stepped out from behind a tree. The Viking saw only a frightened boy and a gray-haired old man as he taunted in Low German, “Yes, grandpa, can we go home now?” Then he laughed.

While it was true that Vulfgang was in his fiftieth winter, it was also true that he, like most of the men in his village, was a retired soldier from the army of the Holy Roman Emperor Louis I. The Viking warrior was taken totally by surprise when the old man attacked him.

Even with his skill as a warrior, Vulfgang was weaponless, and the young Viking soon overcame him. The Viking had drawn a dagger and jabbed it first into Vulfgang's shoulder and then his side. As Vulfgang lay bleeding on the ground, the Viking pulled his long sword and was about to run it through Vulfgang's heart when Peter came up behind the Viking with a large rock he had found.

The boy hit the Viking's head with the rock and, when the Viking went down, continued beating the man's head with the rock. Still conscious, Vulfgang saw what the boy was doing and said, "Enough, Peter. It is enough."

With a final blow to the Viking's head, the boy dropped the rock and went to his grandfather's side, crying. Pulling the boy close, Vulfgang told him, "You did well, Peter. You have saved my life. Now help me up. We must hide this body and go home."

They found a slight depression in the ground a few yards away and pulled the Viking's body into it. Peter removed the man's furs and tunic, covered him with branches, and hoped the snow would cover him before his companions could find him. He tore the tunic into strips and bound Vulfgang's wounds as well as he could, then picked up the sword. The two began making their way toward home.

After half an hour of walking, Vulfgang was spent. The loss of blood had taken its toll, and the old man fell to the ground. "Get up, grandpa, get up. It's not far now, and mother will take care of you. Get up, please get up."

"No, Peter. You must leave me here and go for help. Look up there. See the bright star yonder? Follow that star, and it will take you to the village. You can send some of the men for me."

With those words, Vulfgang passed out. Peter knew that the old man would never live long enough to send someone back and tried to pull him home. Peter was only ten, though, and not strong enough to drag Vulfgang more than a few feet. He looked around him, trying to decide what to do. Going to some small saplings, he used the Viking's sword to cut two of them down. He tore strips of cloth from what remained of the Viking's tunic and tied small branches across the two saplings he had cut, creating a travois. Then, he laid the Viking's furs across the travois and managed to roll his grandfather's limp body onto it.

He now needed to make a harness for himself with which to pull the travois, but the Viking's tunic was all used up. Peter removed his heavy cloak then took off his own tunic and, putting the cloak back on, started cutting his tunic for the harness. That done, he tightened the bandages on Vulfgang's wounds as best he could and began trudging toward the star and home, dragging the travois behind him.

An hour later, Peter could see the light of lamps glowing from the windows of the homes in his village. The boy's energy was spent from his heavy load, but he found the strength to continue on. About that time, he heard shouts and, at first, was fearful that the Vikings had found him. It was a group of men from the village, however. The boy's mother had become worried when Vulfgang and Peter had not returned and had sent the men out to search for them.

They quickly got Peter and his grandfather to the village and into the home of Peter's parents. "Put him next to the fireplace," Peter's mother said. "The Yule log will warm him."

The fire was unusually large that night. It was the time of the Winter Solstice when the people burned large logs to celebrate the days that would soon begin to lengthen and the birth of the Christ. "Will he be alright, mother?" Peter asked.

"I don't know, Peter. He has lost so much blood. His clothes are soaked with it. We will have to wait and see. If it is God's will, he will live."

The men of the village had listened to Peter's story, and when he had finished telling them of the Vikings, they gathered their swords and spears and shields. They set a watch for the invaders, in case the Vikings had been able to follow the boy, and deployed themselves to ambush them. Just before dawn, the Vikings came, thinking they would have an easy time gathering slaves.

They were not prepared for the welcome that awaited them, however, and in short order, were cut down to the last man. An old soldier with his weapons is still a skillful soldier, and they outnumbered the Vikings almost two to one.

As the sounds of battle issued from just outside the village, Vulfgang seemed to rally for a few moments but then slid even closer to death. Peter was crying over his grandfather when his mother said, "Why don't you pray for him, Peter? Sometimes God answers when you ask for an unselfish thing."

Through tear-misted eyes, Peter looked at the crude cross that stood on the fireplace mantle and began to pray. His mother looked at the boy and smiled, then turned her eyes to the wooden cross. For just an instant, she thought she saw it glow, but decided it was the dawning sun shining through the window.

Then Vulfgang groaned. Just as she turned to look at him, he opened his eyes. Peter's mother quickly took him a sip of water, and after a few moments, Vulfgang called Peter to him. "Thank you, Peter. You have saved my life and done what many grown men could not have done. You can be proud of yourself."

"I only did what you have taught me, grandpa."

"And did it well. From this day forward, you will be known to all as a man."

END

rebirth of the sun

by

D. L. Hegel

swallowing calm winter
lasting the longest night
faded gray bark
leafless trees sentinel
glow in full moon
mirrors of virgin snow

my tracks mar
the white landscape
a frosted owl screeches
a warning
a wolf wanders

thoughts lost in my summer
golden flax and azure true
when my summer love
comes to my fall

i will be in the blanket of winter
longest night
fullest moon
a heart to be
resurrected in spring

Seven Hours

by

Neil James Hudson

09:56

It's the semi-final of *Celebrity Circus*. Johnny Q has just completed his tightrope walk, and now they're going to decide which of the clowns has to leave the circus. They reckon that Arlene's going to win it, but it's going to be decided next week.

They know, as well as the rest of us, that there isn't going to be a next week.

It was filmed months ago. I shudder to think where the celebrities are now. Praying, probably, all hooked on some bizarre religion that no one would have given credit to last year: there's a rumour that Johnny Q has joined one of those Centauran cults and that he's at Stonehenge to welcome their arrival. Which will be 16:50, last I heard. Sunset in Washington, on the shortest day.

I've been trying to get into the programme, really have. After all, it's on for a reason. It's there to stop us thinking. But I've had enough. I don't know what made me start writing. I've never kept a diary, never been a writer. I've never cared much about what happened in the past. Only today matters.

Except we don't get today. I think I just wanted to leave something, some record of who I was and what I did. Or maybe I just wanted to do something more important than watch *Celebrity Circus*.

I have an idea that someone will read this. I don't know who. Perhaps it will be a Centauran. Hello, Centauran! I come in peace. Let me tell you about myself. I'm a girl. Do you even know what that means? It's pretty damned important down here, but you might not have gender. We only ever met one of you, and we never even bothered to find out how many sexes you have.

I live with my family. Kinship, do you have that? I bet you do. Nobody gets off that lightly. Dad, Mum, a brother called Marec. My name's Gillian. How do you do? Since I was born, I've gone round the Sun sixteen times: there have been sixteen winter solstices. I've always been a Moon person, though. I love the Moon. I always used to dream of going there one day. Once they'd built a proper Base and made it comfortable. I don't want to go to the Moon and find out that they still have an outside toilet.

I'm bright, Centauran, and I'm not boasting. And I wasn't going to settle for some daft office job, watching my life slide away beneath me as I go through ritual motions every day and watching *Celebrity Circus*. The world was going to be a better place for my being here. I never worked out exactly what it was I was going to do, but I was going to work, and work hard, to make a world in which the Shame couldn't happen.

Now, all I want is to watch the Sun rise.

Marec and parents are downstairs, with the telly on. Let's have an interview. The time for not thinking is over. This is the Last Day, and I'm going to think, and anyone who by some bizarre and deeply regretful accident of birth happens to be related to me is going to damn well think as well. I'm going to go down, ask them what they're thinking, and write it down.

Wish me luck, Centauran, they aren't going to take kindly to this.



12:18

I'm at Chasey's now. She's making tea, using a camping stove: the electricity's gone off. I guess we're lucky, in daylight. On the other side of our small planet, people are facing this in darkness.

I have to keep writing. I'm sure of that. I have to leave this record.

It was Marec. He was coming up the stairs when I went out with my diary.

Oh, my God, Centaur, we deserve this.



12:35

I wanted to call an ambulance, police, anything. Chasey told me not to bother. They're not coming out. She's got a battery radio, but all she's getting is a message to remain calm.

It was Marec. When I left my room, he was coming up the stairs. He was coming for me.

I shut my door on him. I pushed the chest of drawers against it. I don't know how I found the strength. He's much stronger than me, and I knew he could get through.

I could hear him through the door. I tried to tell Chasey, but she won't listen. I suppose she's got her own problems, or perhaps she just doesn't care.

He was crying. For the first time in my life, I heard my brother crying. Really crying: crying for the end of things, for what he'd done. Crying for my forgiveness.

And then he stopped. Just stopped everything.

I'm trying to see him in my mind's eye, remember him as he was. But all I can see is the blood.

The silence from the rest of the house terrified me. I was so scared, Centauran, that I left by a first-floor window rather than open my bedroom door. I hurt my foot when I landed, but I still ran.

I don't remember arriving at Chasey's. I don't think she does, either.



13:08

I've done what I can for Chasey, but quite honestly, I don't know if I can handle it. either. She was sat in her bathroom. She was next to the toilet. That's no way to go. She was hugging her knees to herself. It was as if her knees were all she had left. And I thought, that's not right. There should be someone for her. There should be some family, some friend.

I don't know where her family has gone, or why she didn't go with them. I suppose I should be the friend, then. But I don't think I am.

I want to help her, but I think I have to go.



13:39

The streets are full of drunks. I guess *Celebrity Circus* wasn't doing its job. People are looting the off-licences and bars. They don't need to, most of them have got the money or even have alcohol at home, but I think they want to make a point. A couple of other shops have been looted, electrical shops. One man tried to grope me, but I got out of the way.

Oh, what a miserable way to end! This is what you'll find when you get here, Centaurans, a planet of drunks and thieves.

It's possible Mum and Dad got away from Marec. I'm too scared to go back and see.

I'm going to tell you a secret, Centauran. I don't suppose it matters much by the time you read this, but it's what I think, and that's what I have to record. My secret is: I think we're going to be okay.

I can't explain this feeling. Maybe we have a communications problem. Maybe you've accepted our surrender, or you don't even consider it to be a war: maybe we'll sort it diplomatically. We've assumed the worst by your lack of communication, and the fact that you set off as soon as President Rockwell killed your emissary and stole the scoutship. Made his gamble, as some people put it. Gambled that in the hundred years it would take you guys to get here, our technology would have advanced far enough to take you on. After all, we had your ship to get us started.

Would Rockwell have made the same gamble if he'd known we had five years, not a hundred? Frankly, I think he would. He must have known he was dying then. In the meantime, he would have been like the looters, having the pleasure of owning your ship for the brief time he had left.

You understand, don't you? You understand that the Shame was the work of one man, already dead, and not of the entire planet?

I think you understand. You're arriving at sunset on the winter solstice at the place where the Shame took place. That can't be coincidence. And I've heard it said you chose the shortest day to destroy us, the darkest day, the end of the year. The end of the world.

But what happens after the solstice? The cycle begins again. The world is reborn. I think your choice of arrival is a message of hope.

Nobody else does.



14:10

There was a procession through the streets. They were dressed in white robes, so they must have planned for this.

Most of the robes looked as if they were made out of sheets, so I guess that at the back of their minds, they're not expecting to use them again.

It was the same cult that Johnny Q's been going on about. I guess they're moving all over the world, probably marching to some sacred sites, but there aren't any near here, so they settled for the park. They tried to have some kind of religious service, but unfortunately, the park was already in use—there was a bonfire, and a crowd burning effigies of President Rockwell. The two groups didn't clash, surprisingly.

I'm trying to keep out of the way. Some of the more drunk and desperate men are trying to use their last hours in rape, but they're not making a good job of it, incapable and too panicky, and there are other drunks with a finer sense of decorum who intervene when they look as if it's getting too nasty. I've suffered a few shouts and gropes, but I'm still safe. I suspect things are going worse behind



14:48

Behind closed doors, I was going to say. I had to move. I saw Marec.

He's not himself. I don't see how he can be. I know what he's done to Mum and Dad. He'll have thought it was an act of mercy. I'd thought he'd done it to himself as well. But he seems possessed now.

He saw me, and I didn't like it. I ran.

I'm at a church now. I haven't gone in, I'm just outside. They're holding a service, singing and chanting and praying, just having a ritual they can repeat over and over again, so that they don't have to face up to what's actually happening. They're praying for forgiveness, but I don't think it will work: like the rest of us, I doubt that any of them really feel responsible for the Shame, and are just trying to avoid punishment.

Well, perhaps we are responsible. Rockwell didn't become president without anyone's help. Some of us voted for him. The rest supported a system of government that put people like him at the top. Those who didn't were happy to live in the society that gave rise to him. None of us actually worked to prevent it, to bring about a society in which the Shame couldn't happen.

I've listened to what the priest is saying inside, and it's attractive. He says that on the day of judgement, and that's got to be today, the dead will be resurrected to be judged. We'd love that. I think that's the worst thing about the end: not that we're being punished, but that Rockwell, the greatest criminal in history, got away with it.



15:02

I went back to the park. No sign of Marec. The white-robed cultists have started meditating, no doubt hoping they'll be taken aboard the spaceships. And it's starting to rain. You'd have thought we could have decent weather for the end of the world.

Because who am I kidding? All we know about the Centauran ships are their speed and direction. We don't even know if they're ships. They could be missiles.

There are gaps in my memory. I can't remember leaving Chasey. I can't think why I did it. I think she needs me, and I don't want to end it alone, so I'm going back there.



15:33

I think I must have been here when it happened. I'm just not remembering things properly. I don't even remember writing some of this diary.

There's a bit of blood on the bathroom floor, where I left her. Not much, though. I don't think they killed her. I think they've taken her somewhere.

I should have been here. Just so she wasn't alone.

I've tried to see where they might have gone. They broke in the back door, and I think they left the same way. There's no one around to ask, and I don't dare talk to anyone any more.

Well, that's us, that's the human race. Half of us are bastards, and the other half are too scared to do anything. Come on, Centaurans. Do what you have to.

I wish it were time. There's over an hour yet, and I can't bear it, really can't. And I can only think of one thing left to do.

I'm going to have to go home, see what Marec did. I think I'm going to have to bury my parents.



15:48

Last entry before I go in.

I'm not coming here unselfishly. I just want to die in my own house, in my own bed, maybe.

Except it never was my house, was it? I never got to buy a house of my own. The world ended first. The aliens came, ninety-five years ahead of schedule, and we weren't ready.

The cultists are being strange—they keep meditating, waking up, then going back into a trance. And the stupid thing is, when they're out of their meditation, they check their watches. If you're trying to blank your mind because you know you're approaching death, surely the last thing you need to do is keep an eye on the clock. Or perhaps it's some kind of speed meditation. Maybe they're having a race.

I'm just putting it off, aren't I? Goodbye, diary. I'll talk to you again on the other side of the door.



15:56

They're not here. I can see a bit of blood on the floor, but there's no sign of my parents. What does that mean? Did they escape from him, or did he dispose of their bodies?

I don't know what to feel. I don't think I feel anything. I suppose it's a shame when you have to think about whether you feel or not, but I guess that's what I've come to.

I tried to get back into my own room, but I couldn't. I'd barricaded it from the inside. I'm sat on the other side of the door, wondering what to do.

Oh hell.



16:05

I still feel nothing. I'm sat against the door again. I daren't move. Marec, poor Marec, is sat at the opposite end of the landing. He's collapsed completely, no longer even sobbing, just catatonic, as if that would help. Trying to avoid himself, I think.

Between us is—but no, that's getting everything out of order.

I jumped up as soon as I heard him enter, but I was too late. He must have seen me come in, maybe he was waiting outside. By the time I made it to the top of the stairs, he was at the

bottom.

He terrified me. He seemed to have resigned his position as himself, handed himself over to someone else, someone evil.

He started to climb the stairs.

“Marec, stay down,” I said. “I don’t want this.”

He ignored me.

“What did you do with Mum and Dad?” I said, hoping to shock him out of himself. It didn’t work.

I walked backwards along the landing, finishing against my door. It wouldn’t budge.

He came towards me, breathing heavily. Quite suddenly, I realised I wanted to live, even for the one hour remaining.

And then, I realised someone else was with us. I didn’t see him approach: I didn’t see how he pulled Marec off. I just fell to the floor, realised that Marec was at the far end of the landing again, and that standing between us was the last person I expected to see.

He said nothing. I sat staring dumbly up at him, trying to think of something clever to say. “Can I have your autograph?” I said eventually.

“Sorry, got to go,” said Johnny Q, and then he just switched off. Just like the other cultists. Completely unresponsive.

Although he seems to be coming round now.



16:15

Johnny has drawn me a picture. He tells me it’s a graph of $1/x$. Marec is still quiet: I’ll explain while Johnny’s switched off again.

“Sorry for that,” he said. “But it’s how we’re going to escape the Centaurans.”

“No one can escape them,” I said.

“When we go into these fugues,” he said, “it makes the moment seem like an eternity. What’s your name?”

“Gillian,” I said. After all, I knew his.

“Look,” he said and drew in my diary. “Here we have time counting down, down towards zero. We can only go in this direction. Zero looks inevitable, doesn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Not for $1/x$,” he said, and drew the curved line. “It just never gets there. It goes all the way up here, towards infinity.”

“So what?”

“That’s what we do when we meditate. We make the moment last forever. But it’s a shorter moment every time. We’ve been practising for months then started properly this afternoon. The last one was sixteen minutes. The next will be for eight minutes. Then four, then we halve it every time. We stay in the eternity of the moment: we never reach zero. Excuse me.”

And off he went

He’s off his tree.



16:25

Off again. Marec is awake, looking at me. But it’s a different Marec now. Not the evil one, but someone who hates himself, can’t believe who he is. I’m ignoring him.

“Zeno’s paradox,” I told Johnny.

“Exactly!” he said. “I knew you were intelligent.”

“But that’s rubbish.”

“Not in this case. Zeno was trying to divide a finite space by infinity. But the moment is already infinite. Imagine this diagram is three dimensional. When we go into fugue, we’re not just moving right and up. We’re moving off the page into the air.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I was following you,” he said with a cheeky smile as if he were flirting with an interviewer.

“Why? I’m not one of your cultists.”

“But you are,” he said. “I thought I’d rounded them all up, but then I saw you go into fugue.”

“Me? When?”

“When you left that girl’s house. And you were in fugue again when I arrived here. Excuse me: back in four.”



16:31

I can’t remember leaving Chasey’s. There are other gaps.

“There isn’t much time,” he said. “You’ve got to concentrate on your fugues, you’ve got to control them. Make them last the proper time. You’re nearly there—you can already fugue. Come with me. Two minutes.”

“Why?”

And suddenly, everything fell away from him. He didn't look like he did on TV. He looked human.

"Because I don't want to go alone. Take my hand."

Time stopped.

"There. Easy, wasn't it?"

"What happened?"

"We went up. We avoided the Centaurans."

"But they haven't come yet!"

"Exactly. Stay with me. We can escape this."

I looked back at my brother, staring in pain from behind Johnny, comprehending nothing. I thought of all the cultists, all in fugue, trying to escape the arrival of the Centaurans. I thought of the drunks, finding their own means of escape, and my parents watching Johnny on the television, denying that anything would happen. I thought of the men who had taken Chasey and the ones who had tried to take me, desperate to squeeze an ounce of pleasure from their last hours, because they could think of no other way of spending them.

And I thought: no.



16:40

We chatted a bit more when he came round, then he went under again. And then I moved.

I am not going to pretend to be out when the Centaurans come. We're going to stand and face it.

Because it's not just me out here. More and more people are coming out of their houses onto the streets. The rampagers are calming down: they finally seem to be accepting reality. Only the cultists remain impervious, meditating more and more desperately, but I think they'll give up when the time comes.

We can't get out of this, so we're going to present ourselves, in the open, and take what's coming. It might be our last moment. Or we might find ourselves enslaved. Or they may even forgive us: as we forgive others.

Because it was when Johnny went under that last time that my eyes met with Marec's, and I finally realised what I had to do. I finally saw the suffering that had caused him to act as he had, the awful drives that overpowered the real Marec, and which only I could help him fight. Mum and Dad got away from his clumsy attempt at mercy, I can see that now. And he didn't come to me to kill me, but because he needed my help. My forgiveness, even.

So I stood up, squeezed past Johnny, gathered up my helpless brother, and left the building.

Oops: the missiles have just gone up. So much for our unconditional surrender. All we can see is the vapour trails, like fireworks. They'd be beautiful if we didn't know what they were

and what they were aimed at. We all know they won't work. We didn't get our hundred years: they'll just bounce off the Centauran ships.

What this really means is that the Centaurans are in range.

I've never been in a crowd so calm, so quiet before. All our pain and fear seems to have left us. All that's left is us: fallible, stupid, sometimes evil, but human.

And so, as we stand here waiting to be judged, I'll sign off. I don't think I've ever been so proud to take my place among my fellow humans. It may be the last time. But it was worth it: I was here, I lived. Whatever happens in the future, they can't take away our past.

Peace.

Yours truly,

Gillian McClusky



22 December

Who would have thought it! Christmas in a couple of days.

The Centaurans came, stayed the night, and went away. And that's all. The solstice is over, we're hurtling towards spring, and the world is reborn. I don't know if they forgave us, or if it was just a warning. But I think they chose their time of arrival well. People are jubilant, hardly daring to believe that they're still alive.

It's a rebirth. Men and women are already talking about what we're going to do next: how we're going to change. Because we're all sure of one thing: there will never be a Shame again.

Mum and Dad will be back soon. Then we will turn to the future, and make sure we never fall so far again. Nor will we turn our backs when others are falling. Marec is safe upstairs. I'll find Chasey if she's still alive, and I'll never run out on her again. I'll even help Johnny, if he wants it. He didn't want to be alone. He won't have to be. No one will forget what happened here, and how much we almost lost.

And the TV's working again! The President's on.

"The Centauri arrived and found us unprepared. We were lucky. We cannot rely on luck in future. I pledge to the people of America, and to the people of the world, next time we will not be unprepared. The Centauri have yet to see how the Earth defends itself."

And then it was a repeat of *Celebrity Circus*.

END

The Longest Night

by

Kristina Lee

It was funny.

Yesterday, Mari's biggest concern was paying for school. She'd been stressed about having no job and the possibility of losing her scholarships.

Ever since she was a kid, she'd wanted to be a doctor – a surgeon. The precision and grace they operated by... to her science-driven mind, it was the closest she'd ever come to dancing.

Today, that dream was a distant memory.

She'd always been a careful driver, the person who always got passed on the freeway for going five miles under the speed limit. The winter weather advisory had made her going extra slow. Drifts, white-outs, and ice were everywhere.

It'd been one of those freak storms. Nothing on the radar. She'd planned her trip home today for that very reason.

She'd been on the road for less than an hour when the storm had hit.

If only I'd pulled over...

She wondered if that was the thought that was going to haunt her for the rest of her existence – however long that would be.

Eternity, maybe?

Lowering herself to sit cross-legged in the snow, she tapped a finger on her knee as she stared down at her body.

She'd surprised herself by how calmly she was reacting to everything. She remembered the crash – the lights of the other vehicle as it skidded across the lanes and smashed into her Volvo, head on.

She didn't remember hitting her head, though. First guess, that was what killed her.

Her fingers reached out to hover over the bloody head wound, stopping before actual contact was made.

It was strange how she wasn't particularly upset about being dead, but not being able to touch her body was really starting to piss her off.

"Sorry about that." Hand held flat palm over the middle of her forehead, Mari was barely distracted by the voice.

"Don't mention it," she replied, assuming that it was the driver of the other car. She'd seen his body a little ways off.

She hadn't been able to touch him, either.

“No, I mean, the body thing,” the voice continued, drawing her away from her fruitless endeavor.

He was tall, or maybe it was just the fact that she was sitting on the ground. Dark hair in wavy curls just brushing the tops of his ears, high cheekbones, a patrician nose, and perfectly proportioned lips quirked upwards in an apologetic smile...she'd *finally* met the perfect man.

It was just too bad she was dead.

“We can't have you touching them,” he continued, oblivious to her thought processes as his hand swept over the general area.

“Who's we?” Having been recently deceased, Mari wasn't exactly on top of her game, but not even dying could turn her into a complete idiot.

And Mr. Perfect had definitely said, “We.”

“Just call us the Powers That Be.”

“How original.” Mari was pleased to note that her sense of sarcasm hadn't withered with death. Mr. Perfect's lips turned up in genuine smile.

“Hey, I didn't come up with it. It'd be a lot more interesting if I had.”

“How interesting?” There was a teasing note to her words that surprised her, but had her smiling at the same time.

Flirting; the newly deceased. That had to be some weird form of necrophilia, right? Only, did it still count if the come-on came from the dead?

“Something along the lines of The Reapers. Always thought that would make a great band name.” He added the last part as almost an afterthought, but the majority of Mari's attention was focused on the implications of his first statement.

“Reapers? As in Grim?”

“That's me.” Mr. Perfect gave a jaunty wave and smile. Mari bit her lip and fought a grin.

Death, it seemed, was not without a sense of irony.

“So, Mr. Grim Reaper –”

“Just call me Grim,” he interrupted, turning from her with another wave of his hand as he frowned down at the body of the other driver.

“Alright then, *Grim*,” she couldn't quite keep her tone respectful, but she was pretty sure she'd managed halfway decent.

Not that Grim really seemed concerned. His attention was still focused on the other body.

“Dave, Dave, Dave,” he tsked with a sigh, shaking his head as he snapped his fingers. Mari assumed he was talking about the dead driver, until she saw the other guy.

“Jesus.” It escaped before she could stop herself. Where Grim was Mr. Perfect, this guy was like Sasquatch...on LSD. He had hair *everywhere*.

“No, it's Dave, actually,” Sasquatch spoke with a frown and a distinctly annoyed expression. “You're the third person to call me that today. Who the hell is Jesus?”

Mari opened her mouth to respond, but a quick head shake from Grim had her shutting it just as fast.

“You didn’t do your job, Dave.” Grim placed a hand on Sasquatch’s shoulder.

“What job?” Dave asked, glancing down at the dead body before his gaze swung to a temporarily mute Mari. “I got a memo this morning saying the job was off.”

“You got a memo saying the first half of the job was canceled. The second one’s still here.” Grim pointed to the driver, and Dave frowned.

“You serious, man?” Crouching down, Dave squinted into the guy's face, getting closer and closer until, with a strangled yelp from Mari, his head disappeared inside the other man’s body.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Dave’s voice floated on the night breeze, and Mari was forced to literally bite her tongue to keep from making any noises.

“He’s still in there.” Dave’s head reappeared, and he gave it a firm shake before glancing up at Grim. “I thought you guys had contingency plans for shit like this.”

“You’re the contingency plan, Dave. We’ve been over this.” Grim’s voice held the internal patience of someone who was trying to be sincerely helpful to a moron. It was the tone of voice Mari heard most often from parents in regards to their teenage offspring.

“Oh. Right. Well, then.” Dave reached for the body, his hand disappearing this time. It emerged firmly grasping another hand. Only this one was *glowing*.

“Huh?” Not the most articulate of questions, but it got the point across.

“Recently deceased,” Grim told her off-handedly, his main focus on Dave. “They’re always so shiny. Gives me tingles.”

It was giving her tingles, too, but she got the distinct impression there were two different kinds. Grim obviously got the good ones, but Mari was pretty sure she had the nasty, spine-tingling, piss-yourself ones.

“Alrighty, then.” Dave smiled at the recently deceased, a frightening baring of teeth that had Mari grimacing.

The other driver, a glowingly outlined, middle-aged balding man, actually whimpered.

“I’m going to hell, aren’t I?”

Dave’s smile dimmed, and his gaze drifted over to Grim, his expression just this side of mystified. “Why does everybody say that?”

Grim did a palms-up shoulder shrug drawing the soul's attention to him. The poor guy's eyes widened; a desperate cry pierced the night as he *threw* himself at Grim.

“I’m a good person, I swear!”

Mari snorted at that. In her mind, good people did not go around driving like morons in the middle of a freakin’ snowstorm.

The soul-guy turned to look at her briefly, but a quick perusal of the denim-clad, lambskin-jacket-wearing, freckle-faced Mari had him dismissing her as unimportant and turning his attention back to the admittedly angelic-looking Grim.

“Jackass,” Mari muttered crankily, crossing her arms and glowering as Grim flashed her a gorgeous smile over soul-guy’s head. Flushing, she dropped her gaze to the side, focusing on “Dave, the Now-Scowling.”

“You were doing seventy in a fifty-five zone on an icy road,” Dave snarked. “Real good person, you are.”

“I don’t drink; I’m a practicing Republican, and I’ve never killed anybody in my life!”

“Uh, hello?” Mari waved her hand towards her deceased form, deeply affronted by the fact that he’d dismissed her...*again*.

“Please take me with you!” His wailing plea echoed over the snowy clearing, hinting at decibels none of them had previously perceived as existing, much less reaching.

“First off: *ow!*” Grim rubbed his ear with the faintest of grimaces as he scowled down at the other man. “And second off, Dave is not the devil. I don’t even know why people think that; it’s not like he has horns or anything.”

Soul-guy let out another pathetic whimper as the three of them turned as one to look at the hairy man.

“He’s actually pretty nice once you get to know him.” Dave smiled again, and Mari quickly clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing as soul-guy started openly sobbing.

“Jesus.” Grim grimaced as soul-guy’s grip tightened around his legs.

“Where?” Dave whirled around, his attempts at a pleasant façade dissipating under his deep and abiding hatred of this “Jesus” person.

“Nowhere, Dave. Can you take this guy already? My legs are starting to cramp.”

“Sure, no problem, boss.” Cranky as a bear one minute, obedient as a puppy the next, Dave trotted over and firmly gripped soul-guy by his scruff.

“Upsy-daisy.” Dave smiled with genuine delight as soul-guy was forced to release Grim’s legs or risk losing his arms.

“It’s not that bad, actually, being dead,” Dave confided in an odd moment of sympathy. Soul-guy’s whimpers died to sniffles as he peered with an expression mixed between suspicious and hopeful at Dave.

“Really?”

“Really,” Dave assured him with a smile. Soul-guy quickly averted his gaze, but Dave was, thankfully, too busy to notice.

“We’ve got pie, all you can eat buffets, there’s even a movie night. This week is *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*.”

“So I’m going to heaven?” Soul-guy actually managed a smile.

“How the hell should I know?” Dave boomed with a laugh, clapping Soul-guy hard enough on the shoulders to send him stumbling forward to *disappear* into the snow.

“Later c boss,” Dave tossed over his shoulder before doing a hop and a skip and disappearing right behind the shiny soul.

“Finally,” Grim stated into the silence, “I thought they’d never leave.”

Mari climbed to her feet, brushing non-existent snow off her ass as she turned to face Grim. Extending her arms out at her sides and tilting her chin up, she stared resolutely into the face of her future.

Grim, the bastard, grinned. “What the hell are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Mari asked, biting on her lower lip before jutting her chin out at him.

“Do you really want me to answer that question?” Grim was smiling like a freaking loon now, causing Mari to lower her hands to her hips as she glared at him.

“You’re being an asshole,” she informed him snappishly. “Just Reap me already.”

“But you haven’t been Sowed, yet.” Grim’s smile settled for genuinely amused as Mari’s glare intensified.

“Are you shitting me?”

“Fraid not, sugar,” Grim replied, snapping his fingers.

And just like that, the clearing disappeared.

Mari gave a frightened yelp as reality reasserted itself; c her heart-rate slowing as the familiar settings of a hospital came into being all around her.

They were in the hallway with medical personnel bustling all around them. Nurses, doctors, and orderlies walked with purpose consulting charts and wrist-watches as they moved.

“Oh, great, people.” Mari’s relief was short-lived, however, when the stark realization of her demise reasserted itself when someone walked right through her.

It was like being water and having a pebble tossed into the middle of you; reality rippled around her, and by the time everything was back to normal, she was feeling a little nauseous and a lot pissed off.

“What the hell is going on?” she snarled into the now-empty hallway.

“You’re dying.” Grim’s voice was a splash of color in her otherwise drab surroundings.

“Just dying?” Mari blinked at him. “I’m not dead already?”

“Not yet,” Grim replied, crossing his arms as he leaned against the wall, his gaze settling on something inside the open doorway across from him.

When he made no move to do anything or say anything else, Mari took a cautious step forward then walked until she was standing next to him. Craning her head over his shoulder, she peered in the doorway and frowned.

It was a little boy, no older than seven, hooked up to more machines than she knew the names of.

“What’s going on?”

“You saved him.”

“Huh?” Mari whipped her gaze around to find Grim looking over at her, his face so close she could count the freckles on his nose.

“Your heart.” Grim tilted his head towards the doorway, a soft smile decorating his face. “You gave it to that little boy.”

Mari turned her head back to the room, her jaw dropping slightly as a new figure appeared next to the boy, an older woman who brushed a soft kiss across the boy’s forehead. Tears glistened on her cheeks as she raised her gaze to stare Mari dead in the eye.

“Thank you,” she mouthed, her lips tilting up in the most heart-breaking, grateful smile that Mari had ever seen.

“Grim...” Her words died on her lips as she turned her head to find the previously empty hall was now occupied by seven other individuals whose ages ranged from just a little older than the boy to middle aged.

“You saved all of them,” Grim whispered in her ear, his warm presence at her back bracing against the sudden influx of attention.

Mari cleared her throat as she turned her head to the side to speak. “All of them?”

Grim smiled and nodded.

“All of them,” he confirmed, dropping a hand on her shoulder.

She had the vague impression of him tilting his head in acknowledgement to the motley crew across from them before the hallway blurred and disappeared, re-forming into another, almost identical hallway void of occupants.

“What was that? What’s going on?” Mari was starting to sound like a broken record, but she just wanted an answer.

“*Shhh...*” Grim whispered, placing a finger to his lips before he nodded to a whiteboard across the way.

Confused but curious, Mari turned her head and blinked. Squinting, she double-checked, then turned with a question in her eyes to find Grim nodding and smiling.

“Yep,” he confirmed with a quirked grin. “That’s you.”

Green, Mari.

Doctor.

She was a doctor?

“Hey! Green!” The call startled her, drawing her from her curious stare. Turning towards the source of the cry, she felt her jaw drop once more as another figure turned towards her.

“Yes?” The new figure offered the caller a tired smile. Dressed in scrubs and wearing a white lab coat with her name firmly stitched over the breast, Mari stared over at Mari Green and felt her heart kick.

“That’s me?” she whispered, her wide eyes drinking in the other her as she engaged in a focused discussion with an orderly.

“That’s you,” Grim repeated with a faint grin before raising a finger and quirking it in her direction.

“What?” Mari’s gaze drifted back to herself, taking an involuntary step back as the other Mari looked up and stared at her – dead to rights – a faintly sad smile on her lips.

“Hey.” Grim’s broad shoulders appeared in her line of sight, drawing her attention up to his face, his grin wilting slightly for the first time all night. “None of that. We’ve still got places to go, people to see.”

“And miles to go before I sleep.” Mari sighed, raising her arms and closing her eyes. “Just tell me when we get there.”

“We’re there,” Grim spoke before her last word had even fully articulated. Still, for the safety of her stomach contents, she kept her eyes closed a moment longer before opening them and blinking.

They were in a grass field in a park on a perfect summer day. Blue sky, no clouds, and a family of four having a picnic in the grass.

Pursing her lips but keeping her mouth shut, Mari focused her attention on the family, watching as the father rose up from the blanket and scooped the little girl into his arms. The child’s laughter rang throughout the clearing, adding more wonder to the beauty of the day.

“Her name’s Elizabeth,” Grim spoke from her right, startling her.

“And I suppose I save her, too?” Grim smiled lightly but shook his head.

“Not her. Him.” He nodded to the father, who gave his daughter a quick kiss on the forehead before setting her on the ground and sending her on a scuttling run towards her mother.

“How?” He wasn’t one of the people she’d seen in the hallway.

“You’re a doctor,” Grim teased lightly, but there was weight to his words. “A cardiac surgeon, to be precise. One of the best in the nation.”

“And I operated on him?”

“You saved him,” Grim stated, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched the father watch his family. “His heart was damaged so bad any other surgeon would have given up. But you didn’t.”

As if cued, the man’s head turned to where the two of them were standing under the shade of a tree, his gaze unerringly focusing in on her.

“Thank you,” he mouthed, a virtual echo to the woman from earlier.

She had that same kick as earlier, and her hand instinctively reached up to rub her chest as if that could alleviate the pain.

“Why?” She had so many questions, so many answers she wanted, but ultimately, that was what everything boiled down to. “Why are you showing me this? What does it mean?”

“It’s your future.”

There was no dissolution of reality this time – no waves or nauseating swirls. One second they were in a summer paradise, the next they were back in the clearing standing over her body.

“You have a choice to make,” Grim continued, his smile gone as he stared at her with the utmost seriousness.

“What kind of choice?” she asked. Her throat was dry, and her heart was racing, and she had the sickening feeling she wasn’t going to like where this was going.

“Do you know what day today is?” It was an abrupt shift in topics that had Mari frowning in confusion.

“No,” she replied, frantically searching her mind for a point of reference. Christmas was only a couple days away. She knew there were other holidays in other cultures, but for the life of her, she couldn’t name a single one.

For one long, panic-stricken moment, she had the heart-stopping thought that maybe it was just that – maybe what it boiled down to was a weird-ass life and death game of “*Guess What?*”

“Winter Solstice,” Grim stated gently, drawing her from her panicked haze.

“Huh?”

“The longest night of the year. Tonight, the dark battles the light, and the light emerges victorious.”

Grim turned east, his eyes closing and nostrils flaring in the faint breeze, almost as if he was scenting the air.

This was starting to go old-world medieval hoodoo on her ass, and if Mari was freaked before, she was downright petrified now.

“So, what? I fight you and...”

Grim snorted, opening his eyes as he turned to glance at her over his shoulder.

“Sweetheart, you don’t have a prayer of beating me.”

Was that supposed to be comforting?

“We’re not fighting.” Grim’s smile returned in the face of her confusion as he twisted so he was once more facing her.

Reaching out, Mari jumped when his hands settled on her shoulders, looking up to find herself caught by the depths of his eyes. They were dark, like the sky, dancing with pinpricks of lighted stars.

“You need to make a choice,” Grim repeated, his voice solid in the night—which was good—because suddenly Mari was feeling a little weak-kneed.

“What’s happening?” she murmured, reaching up to grab his arms to steady herself. “My head...” Hurt like hell. One hand held Grim’s arm, while the other reached up, touching her head and coming away wet. “What —“

“Blood,” Grim replied softly, reaching up to gently fold her hand into his.

“But I’m not hurt...” Dumbly Mari stared at Grim, who gently turned her so her back was to his chest, both their gazes dropping to the now-familiar but somehow forgotten sight of her unconscious – and bleeding – body.

“Oh. *Oh.*” Eyes widening with realization, Mari tilted her head to look over her shoulder at Grim. “That’s it? I’m going back?”

“Your choices, Mari,” Grim murmured softly, his gaze rising from hers to a point just in front of them. Turning to follow his line of sight, Mari’s voice emerged in a strangled groan as the father from the clearing solidified in front of her, smiling that same heart-breaking smile. “You can live and save that father’s life and countless others through your work, or...”

A little boy’s laughter danced on the wind, and she instinctively jerked her head around to find its source and nearly tumbled into the snow, only Grim’s tight grip keeping her upright.

“Or you can die,” Grim finished, easily drawing her back up to her feet and holding her there, keeping her body steady as her eyes focused on a smiling, little seven year-old Puerto Rican boy.

“You’ll save lives either way.” Grim’s voice was solemn. Staring into the smiling eyes of that little boy, Mari was eternally grateful for Grim’s grip, because she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt she wouldn’t have been able to stand on her own.

“That’s it? Those are my options? I live, he dies.” She nodded to the smiling father. “And I die, he lives?” Her head tilted towards the boy.

“The light wins,” Grim murmured, his gaze steady on her.

“Why can’t I do both?”

Grim snorted lightly in her ear. “Whole new meaning to the phrase stretching yourself thin.”

The joke fell flat, and silence stretched between them as Mari fought for something solid and tangible to hold on to.

She had no concept of how long the silence lasted. Maybe it was long, maybe it was short – she had no way of knowing until Grim’s startled hiss drew her from her thoughts. “What is it?”

“Dawn,” Grim replied heatedly, twisting around so he was standing between her and the two people she had to pick to save.

“You have to decide now.” Grim’s voice took on the first note of urgency all night, his hands holding her arms, keeping her upright.

“I can’t –”

“Mari!” It was the first time he’d called her by name all night. Blinking, she stared up at him, lost and confused.

“If you don’t make a decision now, Mari, you don’t get a choice. You die, and nobody gets saved.”

“What do you want me to do?” There were tears tracking down her face, mixing with the warm blood.

“I can’t tell you that.” Grim’s eyes were practically anguished as he held her. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. You have to decide.”

That was it – one choice that would change her life forever. Life and death, the eternal balance, resting in the moment, and the truth was...

“I’m not ready to die.”

“That’s your choice?”

“Yes.” God help her.

“Well then.” Grim gave her a lop-sided smile. “You’ve been wonderful, Mari Green. I hope it’s a long time before I see you again.”

“Again?”

“Everybody dies, sweetheart.” Grim’s eyes twinkled and his hands opened...

...and then she was falling...

Grim turned east, crossing his arms as rays of light broke over the horizon.

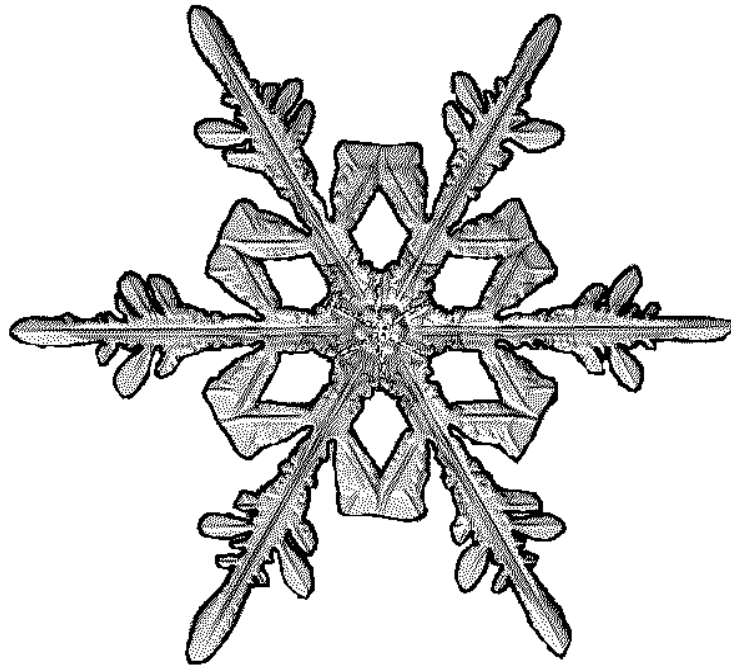
“Not bad,” a feminine voice called from the light, a gossamer-clad fairy emerging from the dawn.

“Not bad?” Grim gave his other half a heart-melting grin. “I’d like to see you do better.”

“Stick around, Reaper,” the ethereal beauty sassied with a come-hither grin. “You might learn a thing or two.”

Grim smirked as he stepped into the dawn. “Sugar, I’m all yours.”

END



The Poets Nine

by
John Hayes

Last August we "poets nine"
wrote near a sparkling lagoon.
Days were long and writing fluid.
We have returned
to rewrite our words from August
and celebrate the winter solstice.

Julia and her friend Eileen
insist the solstice only lasts a moment.
Wikipedia supports their view.
The rest of us
prefer to think the solstice lasts all day.

Today the length of light and dark are equal
and I write
tomorrow dark will dominate
and I will write.
I have no other choice.

Seated on a privy hole
words scramble through my head
notebook open
I start a poem.

My numb fingers drop
my pencil in the hole.
I close the lid
jerk up my pants and step outside.

Julia waits, open book in hand.
She eyes my toilet paper.
"Lend me your roll, I'm out.
I'll leave what's left at your cabin door."

I surrender the roll to her icy hand.
Grab a jagged stone
scratch pliant words
in the rigid soil.

Later tonight we'll join shivering stars
see Orion stalk Lepus
then stream inside to read our words.