

The Glowering Pines

The words were there again this morning, scratched during the night into the new snow that slicks the cabin's front steps. "I love you," it read, beautiful in its simplicity and poignant in its timing. Every time new snow or wind obliterates the message she rewrites it. I recognize her hand -- how she curls the top of the L and tail of the E, just as she did in the love letters we exchanged when I was a handsome young man wooing a green-eyed maid whose smile made my heart skip a beat whenever it appeared. The letters are clear in the crystalline covering but no other marks mar the frozen tablet. From the stoop to the black wall of silent pines more than a dozen yards away there is a clean, pristine expanse. Not even a footprint.

Breakfast almost comes from a bottle but I resist; have to conserve the precious amber anesthetic. Supplies are getting low, and when they're exhausted there's no way to get back to civilization for more. I have food for several weeks yet and I can always melt snow for water -- God knows there's enough ice and snow here to keep me supplied for the foreseeable future -- but the really critical stuff is almost gone. Two fifths of oblivion won't last long. A week, maybe. Then I guess the blessed stupor that stills the whispering voices of the pines and lets me catch a fleeting few hours of sleep will be lost to me and it will only be a matter of time before I succumb to the seductive whispers and walk out into the trees and leave the cabin behind me for the last time. Part of me thrills at the thought of meeting my precious one among the dark, eternal trees, of holding her once again as I did in the happiest moments of my life. And part of me cowers in numb horror at the same thought.

I stand at the window looking out at the early morning sunlight trying to pierce the shadows under the glowering pines. The woods are too thick, the branches too heavy with needles for the feeble light to reach the ground during the summer when the sun is at his strongest, but now, with the shroud of snow added to the fortress' walls there is only murky shade beneath the trees. The clearing where this cabin stands fills with watery light as the sun rises but outside that small oval the light never quite wins the battle. Somewhere out there she sleeps -- in a hollow log, perhaps, or in the silent, stony crypt I built for her. Maybe just on the frozen forest floor. I doubt there's enough sunlight filtering through the boughs to disturb her slumber.

Behind me the hearth glows with cheery flames. I can't quite say why I build the fire every morning and keep it crackling all day. True, for survival I need the heat, but I don't really care whether I survive another day or not -- yet, for all that, the flesh and its encoded self-

preservation instinct won't permit me to just let the cold claim me. I suppose that's why I still lock myself up in this tomb every night, even though I know she can't come in unless I invite her.

I see myself reflected in the glass panes with the dancing fire behind my image. It brings to mind a quote from many years past: "A vampire has had a glimpse into Hell. They know what awaits them." I wonder if that's true, that she's seen past the veil into the infernal pits and if she's damned to that torment when she truly, finally, dies. Is that also what waits for me someday if I lose the will to resist and fall into the velvet noose of her embrace? Will her kiss condemn me as she is condemned? And is the end worth the cost of admission? Every morning I decide that it is. And every night I change my mind and lock the door and pour another four fingers of delicious oblivion to silence the voice that floats in from the pines and calls my name and begs me to come out to her.

Drunkenness is a new thing to me. I was never a drunkard, but I became one a few nights ago when I stumbled from my bed, more asleep than awake, knowing I was going to open the door and step out into the bitter snow and find her hungry lips. I lurched across the floor, fingers reaching blindly for the latch of the door, the whispered siren's call a magnet drawing me irresistibly to my fate. I started to lose my balance as I passed this window and had to halt a moment to regain it and through the window I saw her standing against the ebony wall of the trees. She was silhouetted against the blackness of the numberless tree trunks, a chilled wraith of drifting snow and mist, her platinum hair blowing gently in the eddies of a breeze I would never have felt with my human senses. She was as white as the full moon and just as cold; the only color about her were her eyes. Even from this distance I could see them gleaming like glowing emeralds in her perfect, alabaster face. Her body was more real than fog but less physical than smoke and the white shift she'd worn when I placed the cruel stones around her still form flowed like water against her flesh. It faded and reformed, a shifting pattern of pale shadows tempting to reveal her one moment and obscuring her more solidly in the next. The falling snow did not blow or twist and the branches of the trees were motionless as a statue so I know there was really no breeze, and I wonder now whether this was an alluring trick of her kind to entice and entrap the unwary.

She was standing on top of the snow, eyes seemingly focused on the cabin door and in her concentration not realizing she was being watched. I felt my arm reaching for the door latch as though someone else was doing it and I knew that in a second that alien hand would open the door and I would step through and at last be hers again. I felt the chill metal against my fingertips and it was as though she heard them brush the iron. She started like a cat and her face turned to the window where I stood entranced. The emeralds flickered into rubies, hot as coals

in a forge, and her mouth writhed into an open, unmistakable, lurid invitation. Immediately I stiffened in their gaze and the whispered voice that my ears have never truly heard sang louder and more plaintively. "Come, my prince," it crooned, "be one with me again. I miss you so. Let me show you how desperately I love and need you. Open the door, my love...open the door and join me."

With shaking hand I grasped the latch, my eyes a prisoner of the gleaming pinpoints of Hell's fire that sparkled against the milk whiteness of her flawless cheeks. But as I lifted the hook a change seemed to come over her. The voluptuous grin sagged and the rubies transformed back into emeralds. Her hands flew up and covered her face and the voice in my head sobbed in piteous misery. "No," it wept, "no, I cannot." Then the snowy wraith dissolved into a swirling knot of ice mist that bore a vague human shape...then it too was gone and there was only the night and the snow and the silent pine sentinels. That was the night I started medicating myself so I wouldn't wake until dawn.

The days pass slowly because there is so little for me to do. There are no distractions to take up my hours here; I chop firewood, bring pots of snow into the cabin to melt for water, and stare out the windows in desperate hope some hunters will happen by to get me back to Somewhere. At first I daydreamed about trying to hike out of here and make my way down the mountain but to drive up here took many hours so even if I could hike that far I'd never make it in a day and I mustn't be outside after sundown. When we came up to the mountain cabin we wanted to isolate ourselves from the ever-present drone and buzz of modern civilization, to make some peace in our souls by turning off the phone and computer and TV and radio and the thousand tiny wounds they made daily to us as a couple, so we brought none of those things with us. All our electronic gadgetry sits back in San Fran awaiting our return not so much like a faithful dog but as a ravenous tiger that will devour us next time we open his cage. We brought little more than food and drink and clothes to last us for a month, hoping that would be enough alone time for our harried spirits and pressured hearts to reconnect and make us back into the blushing sweethearts we were six years ago at our wedding. We were naive and stupid and starry-eyed in our ignorance, two city-bred children venturing into a foreign land where we didn't know the rules. Since we never imagined the climb up the mountain would blow our Kia's radiator we made no provisions to get home in an emergency. So here I am, stuck until someone stumbles across this remote camp and finds me...or until the night I finally open the door and step out into the woods.

Ten days, we had. Ten days together here. At first we were awkward in the closed-in space, like two teenagers on their first date. The silence got thick as smoke in the air until I

thought we'd strangle in it. Then, the fourth day the snow started and we danced and played in the drifting white flakes, two exuberant children when school is canceled due to snow. That night we made love with a fire and tenderness we'd lost long ago and our future seemed to open up again. It rekindled us, renewed what we'd thought was too sick to survive, made us want each other again...need each other again.

Two nights after that she awoke in the pre-dawn hours and sat up in bed. Her motions disturbed me and I awoke too, to find her sitting and listening intently. When I asked her what was wrong she only shushed me and listened harder. Then she was getting up and grabbing her heavy robe and slippers. I followed her to the door and watched as she stared out into the blackness, blowing snow flecking her hair and eyebrows. "It's a dog," she said to me. "I can hear it. It must be lost in the storm. Get the light."

I brought the lantern and together we walked out onto the porch. Barefooted, I wasn't willing to walk out into the knee-deep snow, but she was always tougher than I was. "It will die out there," she explained. "I can't let that happen." And so she took the light and stepped out into the night to look for the mongrel she'd heard whimpering.

I felt like a cad for letting her go, so I got my boots and pulled them on, then my coat, and started down the steps off the porch to join her in her search. I was halfway to the wall of trees and wondering why I didn't see the flashlight's glow bobbing in the night when I heard the scream.

It was a hideous, terrified shriek that I still hear in my nightmares, a shrill squeal that bursts out when its owner is suddenly face-to-face with some horror beyond their understanding. I froze for an instant, then turned in panic and ran back to the cabin for a weapon. Stumbling through the door into the dying light of the fire I grabbed the biggest chef's knife from the drawer, and as my fingers closed on the cold handle another scream tore the night. The bleat trailed off into silence and I stood there, immobile with fear, the knife clasped in my numb fingers and my unseeing eyes staring at the orange glow of the dying fire reflecting off the blade. Despite the cold air through the open door sweat ran down my skin. I trembled in blind, unreasoning terror -- whatever was out there was waiting for me. I couldn't move...God forgive me, I couldn't MOVE!

I felt the eyes on my back before I knew anything was there. Then the voice, velvet and soft, but vile and voluptuous in its hunger, whispered my name. "David," it crooned, "come outside. Kaitlyn needs you. She's so cold, David." Somehow I managed to turn my head and look over my shoulder. The open door was a rectangle of black on the wall, and crowded against the portal were other, blacker shapes...things that might have once been men but now were far removed from humanity. They were only shadows to my eyes, obsidian forms blacker than the bitterly cold spaces between the stars. Blood red lights twinkled coldly at their apexes like glistening wet eyes. "Daaa-viiiiid," they purred, "let us in, David. We'll bring Kaitlyn in for you, David...just invite us in."

"Go away," I sobbed into the night-shrouded cabin, my eyes pinched tightly shut so I couldn't see them. "Please, in God's name, please go away!" That's how I was still standing an hour later, freezing in the bitter breeze through the open door, eyes squeezed shut in fear, feet nearly frostbitten in a puddle of urine and the knife still in my numb fingers, as the first feeble rays of sunlight touched the sky. The ebony tormenters must have left sometime during the night because when I finally forced myself to look the doorway was empty, except for a crumpled, pale blanket lying on the porch. Still clutching the knife I reached out to touch the blanket and found it heavy and firm. Roseate stains were frozen into the cloth, and something was wrapped in it like a fly swathed in spider's silk.

Kaitlyn's body was nearly frozen solid. Her flesh was so pale, a sickly pale like a fish's stomach. Deep puncturing tooth marks on her throat, breast, wrists, inner thighs -- so many ugly marks. I lifted her in my arms -- so light, almost like a child -- and carried her inside.

I suppose I was on autopilot at that point. The next day is a hazy, blurred memory; holding her by the fireplace, rubbing her still limbs to try and infuse them with heat and life again; weeping and whimpering her name over and over; loathing myself for my cowardice; and dreading the night that would again release the shapes into the world. Eventually I sort of lost touch with reality. I remember undressing her and washing her body, cleansing the dried crusts of blood from her paper-white skin, and then dressing her in the gauzy chemise she'd brought in hopes of re-igniting our love. I sat vigil over her body all night and fought to ignore the mesmerizing voices outside the cabin as they called me to open the door and let them in.

After sunup I combed the snowy woods, searching half-blind through tear-shrouded eyes and carrying stones from a dry creek bed to construct her cairn. I didn't know what else to do; I

couldn't stand having her where I could see her still, motionless body, it hurt too much. And I knew in the warmth of the cabin it would deteriorate, so I laid her in a shallow grave and covered her with stones to keep her safe until rescue came. By nightfall I was back in the cabin and had almost convinced myself that I was going insane and that there were no black spirits with ruby eyes, that Kate had simply frozen to death while she hunted for a lost dog or been attacked by a pack of wolves. But I was wrong. The sun had hardly left the sky when I heard the whispering, the papery rasping voices, beckoning me to open the door and invite them in.

I hid under the bedclothes like a frightened child, shaking with fear and certain that at any second I'd feel an ebony talon hook into the blankets to pull them away and leave me vulnerable. I recited countless times the only prayer I knew, one I'd all but forgotten over the years: Now I lay me down to sleep and pray the lord my soul to keep... I was still repeating it when dawn broke.

The next night was a rerun, but the following night was silent -- no voices, no whispers on a breeze -- and I felt somehow that it was over, that the shapes had gone. I wasn't sure why they'd left and I really didn't care, so long as they were gone. I slept like a log that night and almost felt human in the morning.

That was the first day the words had appeared in the snow. I stood in the shin-deep powder and stared at them, eyes blank and uncomprehending like an imbecile confronting a microscope, for nearly an hour before the pain of my freezing toes shook me out of my stupor and made me retreat to the warmth of the cabin. Then I stood and stared out the window, mesmerized by the lettering on my stoop. Where had it come from and who had written it? The only answer that fit the evidence made no sense. The shapes were gone -- I don't know how I knew it but in my gut I was certain it was true -- and they'd have no reason to write "I love you" to me anyway, no passing hunter would have done it in the night, I didn't do it in my sleep or there would have been footprints from the front door to the words, so it could only have been written by my Kaitlyn. But she was dead, dead as the stones that I'd stacked over her ghost-pale, inert body. Eventually I couldn't stand seeing those stark letters in the snow. I went out and walked over them until the words were obliterated and gone, then I fell into our bed (MY bed, I reminded myself) and collapsed into troubled sleep.

I awoke in the early afternoon and it was snowing again. Silent flakes as big as poker chips were filling the sky and already there was several inches of fresh, soft powder on the

ground. I brought in another load of firewood and put the steel bucket full of snow near the fire to melt, then sat at the rough table with the whetstone we'd found in a cupboard and the big chef's knife and taught myself how to hone a blade. Whatever had written those words would be back, I was sure, and I wasn't going to be unprepared for it. By dusk I'd figured out how to use the stone and the shiny blade was keen as a scalpel. I gingerly skimmed it down my forearm and watched the edge shave my skin bare, and then I heard the voice outside.

"David?" I dropped the knife to the table and buried my face in my hands, trying to convince myself I'd lost my mind and was only hearing the whisper of my own madness. "David? Do you hear me, Sweetheart? It's Kate, David. Please let me in. I'm so cold out here in the snow"

I closed my eyes and my mind reeled with a vague sort of horror at the voice from outside, making me tremble with fear, so I wasn't really in control as my betraying body climbed to its shaking feet. I didn't really know what I was doing, only that the nightmare was over and my Kaitlyn was still alive and she would hold me and tell me that everything would be okay again. I turned from the table and there she was, her face against the windowpane and staring in at me. As beautiful as my wife had been in life she was moreso now, an angelic sculpture in ice, with hypnotic eyes that reached through my flesh and snared my soul with silken claws. I felt my right foot shuffle forward, then my left, and somewhere in the bottom of my gut a voice was screaming that I mustn't do this, I mustn't open the door to her. But the voice was so far away, so...unimportant...that I staggered forward on my numb feet, hands extended towards her. I perceived her face but I could see only her eyes, glittering and huge on the other side of the glass. She looked so lost, so frightened and alone, that I had to hold her and try to comfort her.

With nerveless fingers I fumbled the catch open and raised the window. Cold mountain air gusted in, carrying sugar-crystal snow against my bare arms. "Kate," I mumbled, and reached out through the window to her.

The change was amazingly fast. The green emeralds of her eyes faded and were replaced by hard, cruel, hungry rubies; her frightened, little girl face twisted into something ancient and savage and feral; her pale lips were suddenly brilliant red, a whore's lipstick red, and twisting into a lupine snarl as long, curved fangs burst from her upper jaw. Her hands shot around my wrists and dragged me out through the open window and her claw-like fingers clutched at the hair at the back of my head, flames of pain dancing through my scalp and me not caring about

the hurt. The hideous mask that somehow still looked like my Kaitlyn growled my name with a sound like a saw chewing through a thigh bone. The twitching mouth split like a raw wound and I felt her breath, arctic and thick, against my throat as her teeth sought purchase. And God help me, I wanted it. I wanted to feel the pain of her fangs tear me open, the whirlpool of my blood swirling out of my veins and into her mouth.

For an eternity we were frozen in place like statues on the porch -- her, with her talons knotted in my hair and shirt collar, and me, with my head bent sideways at a freakish angle and waiting for the stilettos of her fangs to slice into me and reunite us -- as though time had suddenly stopped. Then I heard her voice, seeming to come from so far away, the voice not of the demon-thing that she'd become but of the girl I'd fallen in love with the first time I saw her strumming a guitar in the park, whimper "David? Oh no, not you too. I can't!" and I was flying back through the window to crash onto the floor of the cabin.

I sat up and shook the cobwebs out of my head and looked for her but she was already gone. The open window and snow-dusted floor bore mute testimony that it hadn't been a dream, but Kate was nowhere to be seen. There was only the empty, dark night and the soft sound of frozen snowflakes blowing against the cabin. Somehow I must've kept my senses long enough to close the window and drag myself to my bed and collapse into nightmare-streaked oblivion.

That was a week ago, I think. The days blend together and become muddled in my sleepy brain, and the nights...are there still nights? For me nights are drunken stupor and dim, barely seen shades of nightmares that fill my restless repose. During the day I pray for rescue, when darkness approaches I medicate myself with liquor so I won't hear her beckoning me to the door, and in-between I wonder how much longer I can endure this living death. I stare at the gleaming knife and consider whether it would really hurt so badly if I were to draw it across my wrists and end the bitter dreams; I run my fingers over the cotton bed sheet and ponder whether I have the knowledge to do as I've heard convicts do and twist it into a noose to free me from this bondage. And I think about just opening the door some night and whispering "Come in, Katie," to the darkness. But I'm so afraid of what will come after my eyes close for the final time that I put the knife back in the drawer, climb back under the sheets, and keep the door closed and bolted for one more night.

Why have I written these rambling notes on the inside of this cereal box? Partly to fill my empty hours, but mostly as a warning. I'm afraid that I won't be the last person here, that

some hunters will stumble across this cabin or that another innocent holiday seeker will find it for rent on the Internet as I did, and come in to what they perceive as a haven. This journal will be my only way of warning them that the person they see wandering lost in the woods outside isn't what it appears, that it may be a moonbeam-pale woman with bewitching green eyes and startlingly red lips and Death in her still, frozen heart...or it may be me at her side, or another of her dark, satanic brethren. Maybe with this warning they can still get away before nightfall, or at least be prepared to ignore the pleading voices that drift among the shadowed pines and beg to be let in, until sunrise brings safety again.

But the time has come to pour myself a nightcap. A glass full of dubious peace to see me through the long, dreadful hours until dawn. So, to whatever unfortunate finds these notes, you've been warned. Kaitlyn's still out there, and she's not alone.

Fin

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