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White Darkness

White darkness. The snow glowed under a moon near to full. You could see a long way through the flat hard light, a light without shimmer or pulse. Even the space between snow and moon seemed whitened. And nothing was moving in that white dark but the rising moon and us.

Danny said, "Cut the lights," and I did.

Danny was right—under this moon we could see fine without the lights. It became more like floating than driving. The road rose and dipped. On the rises you saw miles of white snow-light. In the dips it was like sliding into shadow-ponds—I'd ease off the gas and feel my engine cut just enough so my Chevy seemed to be finding its own way down, while I steered dead in the center of the road—there were no shoulders, and with the snow you couldn't be sure what was and wasn't road around the edges. It was three in the morning, as usual, and there was nothing on the road, no tracks but what we left behind us.

The dash lights on my '69 had already gone by then, so inside the car was pitch. I looked over at Danny. His head was black against the white outside. It was like someone had cut a silhouette and taped it on the side window: almost a bird's head disguised as a man's—the pointed chin, the long straight nose, high cheekbones and thin black feathery hair. What you couldn't see in the dark was how white Danny was, and the sky-blue of his eyes.

November in Texas—it had been hot in Austin the other night, and now, four hundred miles northwest in the Panhandle, it was twenty. We'd been driving the two-lanes from Lubbock, where we'd picked Danny up, through Idalou and Floydada, past miles of prairie spotted with farms, past those grain elevators that call themselves towns, through Silverton, down on the Caprock, headed north to Pampa for a gig. The rest of the band would meet us there with the gear. Danny had been working out of Lubbock lately, gigging mostly in New Mexico, so we three hadn't gotten together for a while. We'd looked forward to this gig with him, but then his van had broken down and we had to pick him up. A swing through Lubbock was more than two hundred miles out of our way, but we never thought anything about time or distance in those days.

Any musicians can tell you sounds change in different lights. In that snow-light, even under the drone of the engine, I could hear Nadine's breathing in the back seat soft and clear as a drummer's brushes on the cymbals. She'd been curled asleep back there since Idalou.

The road rose and dipped in the silvery dark. There were cottonwoods in the dips now, so I knew the Red River was close. An old woman once told me it really ran with water when she was a girl, not just sometimes in the spring like it does now. These days there's generally just a stream-size trickle down its east shore, the river just a long smooth ditch spanned by a narrow bridge.

We saw it on the next rise. The snow in the riverbed glared back at the moon. I slowed to almost nothing because there'd be ice on the bridge.

"Apocalypse ain't so bad," Danny said, out of nowhere, as was his way.

“It’s bad enough.”

“Naw, Apocalypse is *fun*. Everybody’s havin’ such a good time skidding toward it.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed what a good time everybody in this old world’s been having lately.”

“Naw, misery’s just the only way the poor devils can handle *intensity*. Underneath all that, they’re deliriously happy. Anyway, after Apocalypse, there’ll be just this—and what’s so bad about this?”

Nothing at all. I stopped the car in the middle of the bridge. It was like you could *hear* the light, a note held forever, so low and so high at the same time, so black and so white. It was like the moon and the earth had traded places.

“Should we wake Nadine?” I said.

“That’s an interesting dilemma. I was just weighing it myself. ‘Cause like, is she better off seeing this, or letting it pour into her sleep?”

We sat still while the car got colder and the light got louder.

“Oh, Lord!” Nadine whispered. She’d woken soundlessly. She leaned her head over the front seat and shook her hair out. Straight and fine, it swayed near me, and I could smell how clean it was.

“Let’s just stay right here,” she said. “I mean, let’s *settle*.”

“The heater fan’s busted,” I said. “We only stay warm while we’re moving.”

Our breaths were fogging the windows, so I rolled my window down. The cold stung my face. My jeans chilled against my legs.

“Danny,” Nadine said, “stop *grinning*.”

“How do you know I’m grinning? You got no idea.”

“This car is thick with you grinnin’ at all this like you made it up yourself. It’s distracting me.”

“Well. I kind of did—make it up, I mean. And what’s so bad about bein’ distracted?”

The moon-shadow of a bird sped over the snow across the road just in front of us. An owl probably, but I couldn’t see.

“I dreamed of Jesus.” Nadine said softly.

“Same dream?”

“Same dream.”

In the dream she’s sitting on the porch swing of the old house in Baton Rouge—but the porch swing doesn’t creak like it does really. It’s morning. Jesus walks out of the house, where he has apparently had his own room for some time. He’s in jeans, bare feet, no shirt. Only way you know it’s Jesus is, first, you just *know*; and there’s his long, shiny light-dark hair; and there’s the brightness of his eyes. Like, at that moment, standing on that porch is *exactly* what he’s supposed to be doing.

It’s not like Nadine’s living with him. He’s just a got a room there. So they know each other, but just to say hello to.

Jesus opens his mouth and a big fat fly comes and lands on his tongue. Then another. Then another. Jesus has his tongue stuck out as far as it will go and the three flies are walking around on it. Then one walks over the edge and hangs upside-down on the bottom of Jesus’ tongue. The two flies on top are just cleaning their feet like flies do. The one on the bottom sticks his little sucker into the tongue.

Nadine wants to puke and she wants to pray but mostly she wants to *say* something to Jesus—but she’s scared to speak because the flies might go into her mouth. So she keeps her lips clenched tight, presses them together so hard it hurts. She knows how ugly her face must look, scrunched up like that, but she can’t help it. Then one of those fat flies lifts off Jesus’ tongue and buzzes toward her, and she’s so scared she wakes up.

But when awake, the fear would pass and she’d mostly have an afterglow of being real pleased that Jesus had a room in her house. The first time she had the dream and told it, Danny tried to interpret it, like he does everything, but Nade hushed him *fast*. When we asked he about the flies she said, “That’s just dream-stuff.”

Two dark horses walked from beneath the bridge and went slowly up the riverbed. Their hooves left black holes of shadow in the snow.

Nadine squeezed my shoulder.

“I wish there were three of them,” she said.

Very softly, Danny started to sing:

Then come sit by my side if you love me

Do not hasten to bid me adieu

Just remember the Red River Valley—

Danny had a sweet throat-warbly voice that, soft as it was, could still soar. And as much as it soared, it quavered, like something was always half-strangling in Danny’s throat. And there was something in that quaver, more than in the prettiness of his tone, that pulled you in and made you listen. It was unbelievable that a man could sound so sweet and still sound like a man, yet he did. But you heard it clear that somewhere in that unbelievable sweetness something was being squeezed, twisted even, and was letting you know.

He let the song just hang after three lines.

We were *so* cold now.

“Who’s gonna admit they can’t stand it anymore?” Danny said.

“You just did,” Nadine said. “Two more minutes, we won’t die.”

The horses were standing together, side to side, stone-still, their moon-shadows gray right under them. We couldn’t see the moon anymore—it must have been staring straight down on the car—so the light seemed to have no source.

Danny was staring at the horses. “I wonder where the other two are. There are supposed to be four, doesn’t it say?”

I hit the ignition key, put the Chevy in drive and eased on the gas. The wheels spun on the snow, the car slid toward the bridge rail, brushed it, but gently no dent, just one more scratch. The wheels caught, and we rolled slowly across the bridge.

“The horses are watching us,” Nadine said.

We watched them back.

Across the river the road dipped and rose again for about thirty-forty miles to Clarendon, the next town.

“I sure could use some coffee,” I said.

“There that new AM/PM in Clarendon,” Nadine said. “They’re open twenty-four hours now.”

“Man,” Danny said, “even the *tiny* towns need twenty-four-hour joints these days. Nobody can sleep in this damn country anymore.”

At the speed we had to go on this road in the snow, Clarendon was almost an hour away. The car's motion forced the engine's hot air through the heater ducts and we warmed slowly.

"Naw, we're Apocalypse people, there's no other explanation for us. Not for us, and not for twenty-four hour joints in Podunk towns. Rock 'n' roll is pure Apocalypse."

"I hear *that*," I said.

"Apocalypse is what we do for a livin'. Apocalypse ain't so bad."

Nade said, "Shut up, Danny. You don't know a thing about it."

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