

9/18/21

Ice Flowers

by Joyce Thompson

①

BEING WARNED that a madman will howl under your windows when the moon is full does not prepare you for it when it happens. Nothing can prepare you for it—that first night when the strange voice penetrates your dreams and you mistake it, at first, for some nightmare voice of your own. You shift under the covers, burrow deep, trying to protect yourself against this renegade inside you, until at last you wake and see the moonlight, and know it is not you.

You get up, finally, and go to the window that lets the moonlight in, because no matter what is there, not to see it is worse than seeing it.

It takes you a while to find him, hidden in the tree trunks and almost as slender. When you do see him, it is as shape only, a negative exposure on the dark woods that close around your house. His hair is silver, long and wild. It is the realest thing about him. You look for the moon that does this to a man. As you find it, a dark cloud bites down on it and leaves a jagged scar.

He is not talking to you now. He talks to the trees, and to the horses. They have stolen out of the woods and gathered at the paddock fence to listen—three dark shapes and one white, tails twitching nervously, hooves pawing the dark earth.

His voice drops now and he speaks to them privately. Is he talking horse? Horse breath makes clouds in the night. When they turn and gallop off, dismissed, they leave a vapor trail behind them. He speaks again, and now you are sure he is speaking to you.

Being warned that a madman will howl under your window when the full moon comes does not prepare you for the fact that he speaks brilliant nonsense that cuts into your heart.

He turns to go now, and you return to bed. When he reaches the kennel, the dogs explode; their barking shatters the calm. When you get in bed again, your husband stirs enough to reach out a hand to find your thigh and ask, "What is it?"

Once they've started, the dogs do not stop barking easily or all at once. They excite each other, spur each other on. "What scared the dogs?" your husband asks.

"It was him," you whisper. "It was Mr. Hart."

Your husband's name is Tom. His work is a drug that puts him

to sleep, exhausted, and a goad that drives him early from your bed. In the morning, you tell him about the visitation. It did not penetrate the pillow he put over his head, did not seep into his dreams. Only the racket of the dogs aroused him; that is the kind of music he, a veterinarian, is wired for. "Next time," he tells you, "wake me up."

You query the neighbors. Hart is older than you guessed, past sixty. Brilliant. Italy. Fast cars. Fast women. Madness. No one knows more. Fourteen years in an asylum, then release. For seven years he has been the nearest neighbor of your house, and you have lived in the house one month, while one moon shrank and grew.

As long as you live here and he lives there, the visits will not stop.

He is not seen by day, though he walks the woods with his dogs and knows, knows everything that happens in your house and in the neighbors'.

He never washes. He is covered with boils.

His dogs have mange.

There is nothing you can do.

He is a well-connected madman. When his people bought him his house, they bought the local police chief, too. Complaints will go unheeded.

Is he ever lucid? you ask them.

No one knows.

It is the first of many visits. Some nights your husband wakes up, too, and mourns his broken sleep. His body and the demands he makes of it are in a race, and there is no slack in his schedule for the howling of madmen. One night he jumps from the bed, wraps himself in his bathrobe, goes to the window and throws it open. The cold rushes in. You get up, too.

"Hart! Mr. Hart!"

And the face, always hidden before, raises up, reveals itself, wreathed by the wild, white hair.

"Oh, Dr. Tanner. Good evening, sir."

It is not much of a revelation; the eyes continue in hiding, two stars shining at the bottom of two deep wells.

"Why don't you go home and go to bed?" your husband says.

9/16/21
"It's three in the morning."

"I would if I could, but she . . ." he gestures at the moon, "will not permit it. I have business to transact, with these trees, with these beasts."

"Can't you do it during the day? I need my sleep."

"I never sleep. I seem to have lost the hang of it. And it's so comforting, to do one's business in the dark."

"Well, you have no business here." Your husband's voice is tense, and you put your hand, a hand intending caution and restraint, on his arm.

"Please," you whisper gently, "please don't."

"And my wife. You frighten my wife, coming around like this."

"My respects to your wife. Is she there with you now, young Mrs. Doctor?"

Your flesh prickles. He knows you from the trees.

"She is. And she'd like to go back to bed, if you'd give us some peace and quiet."

"A thousand apologies. I don't wish to disturb you. But you see, I act under compulsion, almost exclusively, when the sky is in such configurations. I intend you no harm. Please tell your wife I wish her good rest, and pleasant dreams."

"Jesus Christ," your husband says. The words freeze visibly. He slams the window shut. "Does he always have to sound like he's playing Hamlet, for Christ's sake?"

"Mrs. Winter says he went to Oxford."

"Good," your husband says. "Fantastic."

You go to bed, and go to sleep in silence.

It affects everything somehow. That voice. The voice slides between you and your husband, pushes you, ever so slightly at first, apart. He comes home to you later and less passionate, speaks less and less. It is not your fault a madman howls under your window at night, but both of you begin to believe that it is.

You have plenty of time alone, to contemplate the voice and what it means. Sometimes it speaks pure poetry. One night Hart finds a book you've left on the dashboard of the car and asks to

2
borrow it. Next morning, it is gone, and every night for a week you leave a note in the same place the book was:

Dear Mr. Hart,

I hope you enjoy One Hundred Years of Solitude. When you finish, won't you come by some evening and discuss it? Early evening. Your postmidnight visitations disturb my husband; he needs his sleep.

The note remains, untouched, until it fades. Two weeks later, the book appears one morning on your welcome mat, wrapped in a rag to keep it dry in the finely sifting snow. No note of thanks, no word at all.

Then, suddenly, the visits stop. Your husband relaxes a little and is less fierce, but his nascent scowl remains. The voice is his pain, and he knows too much about pain to put faith in remissions.

You miss the voice. You hope that Hart is well.

All through February, the days are crisp and brilliant. It only snows at night, and the predawn freeze makes every new snow snap and squeal under your boots. Winds litter the whiteness with the elegant black brushstrokes of fallen twigs, and it is good to be abroad, making your way through the woods with your dog and both of you half-crazy with the excitement of the cold. You follow him, the dog, to the edges of the river and what he shows you there—ice grafted onto nature in sculptured elegance—arrests you utterly.

Ice flowers. Ice grass. Ice twigs. Ice stones. Clear and pure as crystal things, though it is a long time since there was any glass-maker with skill like this. When you have looked your fill and risen, you see the tracks behind you in the snow—one set of human feet and several dogs. You put your own foot in the clearest print to make sure it isn't yours. It is a longer, thinner foot than yours, Hart's foot. If he came once, he may again. You wait. Throwing sticks for the dog is your excuse for waiting, and you stay out until four o'clock nightfall forces you to think of home.

Your house is empty except for its warmth. You are only beginning to thaw when the telephone rings and you pick it up expecting to hear your husband say he won't be home for dinner

9/16/21

yet again.

Instead there is a long silence. You speak into it, self-conscious. Who? What? At last, just as you are about to hang up, "Mrs. Doctor Tanner, are you there?"

It is a moment before you know it is *his* voice, it is so shrunken and altered by the apparatus through which it reaches you.

"This is Charles Madison Hart."

You can hear the breaths between his words, always lost before in the night air, and hearing them seems intimate and makes him real.

"I wanted to explain why I can't come to call, and why you shouldn't ask me. I appreciate your kindness very much, you know."

"Then come. Please come at a reasonable hour and come inside and have a cup of tea."

"I can think of nothing more delightful. But I must decline."

"Why?"

"Because of what I've done."

"What have you done?"

His pause is pure flirtation. Then, "I've done quite terrible things. My sister could tell you, except she's too discreet. You know my sister?"

"I scarcely know her."

"Then take my word. And my regrets. I'm quite mad, you know. The doctors couldn't cure me, so they let me go."

"You sound fine now."

"I am. I am. But it's nothing one can count on." You hear him sigh. "As it is, I'm an unpredictable fellow, unfit for any but the life I live. Dangerous, that's what I am. And why I can't accept your kind invitation."

"It stands," you tell him. "If you change your mind."

"My mind changes itself," he replies, before the line goes dead.

In March, you come under siege. His visits become a persistent nightmare and peace an occasional exception. Your husband is wire tightly coiled away from you. The nightly visitations sub-tract sex from his schedule and you become a lame duck bedmate, a neutered teddy bear, soft, warm, and sexless. Your skin is hungry and your nerves go into mourning, beginning to dream

3

about the dead.

Outside your window, a madman plays King Lear or makes up his own poetry for trees and shingles. Some nights he too dreams sex and shouts his fantasies—perverse, inventive, terrible fantasies—at your barren window. His lust shines in the night. It is a lust of the mind that remembers bodies, distortions nostalgic for reality. Your own dreams twist and turn upon themselves, have you mating with women and trees, never far from the edge of an ice-choked river just melting into spring, and you wake up ashamed.

One night a strange thing happens. The voice is there, the message is lust, and just as the image grows orgasmic, your husband groans in his sleep and instead of falling back deeper into pit and pillows, raises up and rolls on top of you and takes you, not tenderly, but hard and fast, with unaccustomed passion. He says nothing and you answer with a silence of your own, but you are pleased, relieved, encouraged. In the morning, he doesn't remember.

But morning is his time of power, when he solves problems and his energy, renewed by sleep, seems endless. It is morning, then, when he appears unexpectedly and pounds the table with an emphatic fist.

"We've got him," your husband says. "We've finally got him."

"Got who?"

"Got Hart." His grin shows teeth. "I filed a complaint about

his mangy dogs, running around loose. They're awful things. Nearly bald, half of them, and going mad from the itch." Your husband's eyes zero in on yours. "He's either got to kill them or cure them." He pulls a paper from his shirt pocket and unfolds it. "I estimate that to cure them, it'll cost in the neighborhood of fifteen hundred dollars. Isolation for a month, and treatment. Plus food. It adds up."

"What if he doesn't want them cured?"

He lays an imaginary shotgun against his cheek, squints down the barrel and pulls the trigger. "Then, pow!"

"Why, Tom?" you ask. "He's harmless."

"He bugs the crap out of me. I haven't had a good night's sleep in weeks. And it's criminal to let animals run around in that condition. It's cruel." His lips lose their fullness and become

9/18/21

4

a grim, straight line set in his jaw.

It does not silence Hart. Instead his visits start earlier, just past midnight, and go on longer, sometimes almost till dawn. They are pleas now, not performances, and have a single theme.

"Don't take my dogs away. You mustn't take my dogs away."

Your husband gets less sleep than ever, but now takes a kind of malicious pleasure in his forced insomnia. He smiles at the ceiling, night after night, awake and listening.

The pleading tears at you. "For God's sake, Tom, go talk to him. Tell him you won't hurt his dogs. Tell him they'll feel better without the mange." So you plead, too, and he refuses to answer either one of you, just stares at the ceiling, arms crossed behind his head. "Please, Tom. Maybe he'll go away if you'll only re-assure him."

"If he wants to talk, he can come to my office or call me on the phone. Otherwise, forget it. He doesn't exist."

The man who doesn't exist continues to cry out under your windows, and finally, you can't stand it anymore and sit upright and start to swing your legs around. "Then I will."

"No!" His arm swings out so suddenly and hard that when it hits, it takes your breath away. You fall back flat on the bed. He offers no solace or apology. You turn away from him and cry.

The voice goes on. "I beg of you, Dr. Tanner. Don't take my dogs away."

They take the dogs by force. The dog catcher's van is accompanied by two state troopers and a public health officer in a sleek police car. When he sees he is outmanned, Hart flees. The dogs scatter, in the woods, along the river, through the golden stalks and stubble in the fields. The men give chase.

Just picture it, the five of them, running fast as they can, encumbered as they are by ropes and nets, by guns and big men's boots. They trample the fields; they sweat and swear; they tear their pants on broken branches. As they close in on one dog on the river bank, about to snare him, one of the troopers steps back incautiously and plunges half his leg into the river's molten ice. He screams. They start at two in the afternoon. By five they have captured all but one, one wily dog, who still outsmarts them. Five dogs taken. Five dogs cower in the catcher's van.

"Maybe we should come back tomorrow for the other one,"

the public health man, out of breath, suggests, but four pairs of eyes glare back at him, four panting men refuse as one. Hell, no. For this is a religious war.

They stand watch near the entrance to the woods. The sun is at a low slant on the fields and the evening chill makes it seem winter is coming back. All but defeated, they stand. One damn dog, one mangy dog outstanding. Their curses steam. And then. And then, they see a small form dash across the field and take cover behind a golden stand of stalks.

"It might have been a rabbit," the public health man says.

"That was a *daavg*."

"How the hell we gonna catch a dog at this distance? He'll be in woods before we cross the road."

"Like this," the wet-legged trooper says. His sock is slowly freezing around his calf. He plants the butt of his rifle on one beefy shoulder, lines up the stalks, and cocks the gun. They wait in silence till the small form moves.

The trooper fires. Fires again for good measure. Five prisoners, one casualty. They call it a good day's work.

Your husband tells you all about it, with manly glee, and you listen because you have no choice, but after dinner you go to the bathroom and reach up all you've heard and eaten. Going to bed that night, you are equally afraid of your husband and of what the voice will say. It does not come. Your husband sleeps.

Next morning, when he's gone, the telephone rings.

"Your husband is a cruel man."

You can neither agree nor disagree, for different reasons.

"You should leave him."

You tell Hart what you tell yourself. "He's my husband. I married him."

"I want to see my dogs. When can I visit them?"

"You'll have to talk to him. To my husband."

"I wouldn't like to do that. Tell him, please."

"I'll try, but . . ."

"No."

Hart takes a smart revenge. Every night he sits outside your husband's clinic door, saying nothing, quite circumspect in behavior but so strange and awful in his appearance, with his ragged

9/18/21

5

clothes, his boils, his matted hair, that he scares your husband's clients and makes small children cry. The dogs bark incessantly, his own dogs loudest of all. He will not speak to you; your husband will not speak to him. The wholly owned police chief will not make him move away.

The dogs are cured. Your husband, perhaps not feeling his victory is complete, will not release them to Hart, but calls his sister, Mrs. Welton, to come and claim them.

"My, don't they look nice and healthy. Thank you so much, doctor," she says, and writes a check for fifteen hundred and twelve dollars right then and there.

And you wouldn't have known unless, years later, in another incarnation, with another husband at your side, you quite improbably met up with Mrs. Welton at a cocktail party, and she told you: that when you left, her brother Charles went to your husband's house and beat on the door relentlessly until he opened it, then seized Tom by the shirt, shook him hard against the door frame, eyes ablaze, and asked and asked again: *What have you done with her?*

You tell Mrs. Welton to thank her brother for his concern, to tell him you have prospered in another life.

END

DYLAN THOMAS (1914-1953)

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.