

SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT

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Third Place, Short Story

Now, which of the multitude of faces that showed themselves before him was the true face of the buried person, the shadows of the night did not indicate...
Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

FOR THE SIXTH night in a row, Mara Fox was kept awake by the howling of wolves. On the first night, Mara had barely begun to drift off to sleep. On this night, however, the howling began long before Mara even began to think about sleep. She pulled the covers up to her chin. This made her feel less vulnerable, though she hardly knew what evil she was warding off. She had closed her closet doors before climbing into bed that night—something she had not done since she was very little. She did not bother to ask herself, as she did so, why the lumpy shadow of her basket of dirty laundry, sitting just inside the closet, should make her so uncomfortable. No more did she ask why, on the hottest night of the year, she should prefer to sleep with legs and arms and shoulders all carefully tucked beneath the sheet.

She had gone to bed at eight o'clock that night. Going to bed early was unusual for Mara, but this had been an unusual week. Her father had left for Norway on one of his archaeological digs the day before, and without taking her with him. Ever since he left, Mara's mother had been a bustle of activity—catching up on the laundry, baking, cutting coupons out of magazines, and cleaning out the garage. She had already given herself three very bad fatigue headaches in the past two days. The weather reports were calling it the hottest August on record for that part of New York State, while the slate-gray storm clouds promised a refreshing rainstorm but merely lent a sticky humidity to the overwhelming heat. The Fox family's two bloodhounds, Milo and Gideon, had been on edge all week. They stayed outdoors with their tails between their legs, watching the sky. Any little rumble in the clouds set off a torrent of yelps, and every time Mara came home, they would slink behind her into the house, licking the backs of her legs. Mara knew they sensed a change in the air, just as she sensed a change coming in her own life.

The howling that had begun six nights ago unsettled the two dogs even more than the weather did. If the howling of the wolves had not been enough to keep Mara awake, the answering barks from the laundry room certainly would have. No wolves had ever been heard of in the Fox's home valley that nestled among the Catskill Mountains. Their presence was something that not even Mara's father could explain. He had promised to talk to a friend in the ranger service about it but left without making the inquiry. Mara knew, however, that the wolves were not the only strange creatures that had invaded the valley. Just off Rip Van Winkle Road was a rickety shack, once a cabin, settled in a shady spot of greenery. The cabin had not been lived in for at least fifty years. Yet only six days before, Mara discovered that someone had taken up residence there. She first caught a glimpse of the inhabitant one afternoon on her way to her part-time job as a library page. The old woman had obviously seen her first, for she vanished into the cabin before Mara could get a proper look at her face. She was at least seven feet tall, and had the lumpiest figure Mara had ever seen. That same night, as Mara walked home

toward a fading sunset in the west, she could make out the outline of the old woman's gargantuan form in the deepening shadows. The old woman stood on her porch, arms hanging by her sides ape-fashion. It was the darkness that made her bold. Her stance offended Mara—the more so because she couldn't see the old woman's face. Mara hurried by, trying her best not to look back, but she could have sworn that a low, cold laughter followed her until she was out of earshot. That was six days ago, but the imprint of fear and disconcertedness the event had left on Mara's mind was still fresh.

Only two kinds of insomniacs exist in the world; the accepting ones who abandon sleep as a losing battle and get up to do something useful with their time, and the tenacious ones who stay in bed, resolutely telling themselves, *I'll fall asleep any minute now*. Mara was the latter. She tried desperately to clear her mind for sleep, but it was no use. Her head was too full of recollections, both recent and long forgotten. The more she tried to block these out, the more they danced around behind her eyelids in unconnected streams of consciousness. Somehow, her sister Elsa always seemed to find a way into these night visions. Things kept getting mixed up. For a while, the old woman in the cabin and Elsa played a kind of seesaw game with Mara's thoughts; one predominated while the other sank into the background. Elsa won out in the end. Sometimes, Elsa's milk white skin, little snub nose, auburn hair, and bright blue eyes were present, mocking her with their innocence, independence, and beauty. Sometimes she saw Elsa as a two-year old baby, curled up in the lap of a six year-old Mara as Mara read to her out of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Sometimes she saw her as she was at present, winning her way through the eighth grade (two grades ahead for her age), a favorite with all her teachers and more popular with Mara's own peers than Mara could ever hope to be. Gradually, *Elsa*, merely *Elsa*—unaccompanied by any other concept—echoed in Mara's head until she was sick of the name. For the past month, Mara had been begging her father to take her along with him on his Norway excavation, and three nights ago, her last chance to persuade him had failed. Yet even as she thought back on this latest disappointment, she held firm to the notion that this was Elsa's fault.

"Look, Dad," she had said in her eldest daughter tone. "I've been on your digs so many times. I know the whole routine. I won't get in the way like I used to. And I have been helpful *sometimes*."

"I never said you got in the way, exactly," began her father.

"Remember Bolivia last year?" she continued excitedly. "I found that dish-thingy—you said yourself it was rare."

"Yes, it was a good find. I was proud of you. But this is a special project—I'll have enough to do supervising fifty people, without giving special attention to a high strung daughter with a voracious appetite for knowledge." This was said with an affectionate smile, but the smile made Mara feel very young and immature, as if she were five years old and had asked for a pony for her birthday.

"But I'm older now," she said in a shaky voice.

"All the more reason for you to get bored when I'm not around to teach you new things."

This made a little too much sense for Mara. She sat in sullen silence, and for a moment, Miles Fox thought he had won his battle. But Mara had one parting shot left. “But, Dad. Think how educational it would be. Do you have any idea how good these things look on college applications?”

Miles smiled and shook his head. “You’ve already been on enough excavations to provide the material for ten college application essays. Besides, school is even more educational. School starts two weeks before I leave, and I don’t get back until the end of September. There’s no way I’m pulling you out for that long. And even if you stayed for only the first two weeks, it would hardly be worth it.”

“But...I like this kind of archaeology. I like it better than anything in Bolivia...” she could not finish. She was about to say, “Sometimes I think it’s the only thing I really like,” but her throat had long since tightened up and now her eyes were beginning to sting. Whenever Mara could not get a tight rein on her emotions, she felt childish. *That’s what he’s doing; he’s forcing me to look childish*, she thought with a kind of vague, petulant anger. *Why can’t he see how important this is to me? Why can’t he see I’m not asking for a stupid pony?* She quickly brushed away a tear, hoping he would not notice. He did notice.

“Mara,” he said, laying his hand on her shoulder and putting his face on level with hers. This time his tone was both tender and serious. “I know how much you like it. I like it too. The European mythologies were what first got me interested in archaeology. And I know how knowledgeable you’ve become. At least, you know enough about it not to call anything you dig up a ‘dish-thingy.’ Now, I wish I could take you with me. I *would* take you if I could. But it just won’t work out this time. There’ll be more European excavations—I’ll take you on the next one—I promise. But I can’t take you on this one. You ‘ll just have to accept that.”

You’ll just have to accept that, thought Mara as she remembered her father’s tone and look. *Did Elsa have to accept not going to Greece?* The very night of Mara’s conversation with her father, Elsa came home and told her parents that her best friend, Jamie Quayle, was touring Greece with her family for the ten days before school started. Jamie’s older brother had some kind of emergency and could not go, so the Quayles had offered to give his plane ticket to Elsa. Miles and Ingrid Fox did not have much trouble finding reasons to allow their youngest daughter to go.

“We know the Quayles. They’re a good family. I trust them.”

“So do I.”

“She won’t be missing any school.”

“But can we afford to pay for the rest of the trip?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“What an opportunity to get acquainted with the world! She’ll learn so much.”

“The poor thing hasn’t had a real vacation in so long!”

Elsa had won her battle, and without even fighting to win it. Mara’s grip on the sheet relaxed a little as all these recollections floated through her head, and eventually

she even ventured to let her arms rest on top of the sheet, with the sheet pulled up to her armpits. The room was growing unbearably stuffy; she thought of opening the window. *Elsa...*

Five minutes later (Or was it an hour?), she was still contemplating whether or not to climb out of bed and open the window, when the bedroom door creaked slowly open. For half a second, Mara's breath constricted under the weight of an illogical but irrepressible fear as the shadow walked up to her bedside. The moonlight streaming through the window cast a glowing light on the face—her father's. It did not seem strange to her that he should be there in her room, even though she saw him board the plane for Norway only two nights ago. His green eyes twinkled through his spectacles. Mara leaned back on her pillow and basked in the warm glow of the smile he gave her through his dark auburn beard.

"Did you say Elsa could go to Greece?" she asked.

"No. That was all your mother's doing. Elsa won't go to Greece if I have anything to say about it."

"I knew it!" said Mara in a soft, triumphant tone. But as she spoke her father changed before her eyes. She was looking at herself. Then she was herself, standing where her father had stood, except that now she was looking at her closet. The sliding door was open and she saw the basket of dirty laundry, heaped to a far more menacing degree than she remembered. Hadn't she closed the door before she went to bed? Well then, she would close it now. Strangely, however, the more she tried to walk to the closet, the more she found herself rooted to the spot. She was too afraid to move—too afraid that the laundry would suddenly change into—well, something frightening. Yet she *must* move. Life and death could not be more important than closing that closet door. Her frustration was great. Then, as she struggled there, her fears were realized and relieved all at once. The laundry basket was no longer a laundry basket but the old woman Mara had passed by in the cabin. *The hag*, Mara thought. First it was merely the outline, the huge shadow that Mara remembered seeing on her walk home, now lurking within the frame of her closet. Then the face became clear. A vulgar grin was spread overall. The nose curved into the most preposterous hook, protruding from the face, and with a wart on the tip. Two black hairs grew out of the wart. The pale, oily brow was large and low, jutting out and hiding the eyelids completely from view. There were no eyebrows. The eyes were worst of all. They were green, with a yellowy orange light in the center. Her thin mouse-brown hair (what there was of it) was tied in a tight knot in the back. *The hag*.

"My! You don't look much like your sister Elsa!" she said mockingly. "Your hair is so flat—not like Elsa's curls! Why don't you come with me, dearie? I'll make you beautiful—as beautiful as me!" Then she broke into a prolonged cackle. The fiery centers of the hag's eyes were drawing her into their depth, and soon Mara saw nothing before her but a flickering yellow-orange light. Then the light faded, but now she felt a burning in the centers of her own eyes. She looked around and realized she was standing in her closet. Elsa had just bounced into the room and was looking at her.

"Dad says I can go to Greece," she said jubilantly.

"You're lying," said Mara fiercely. "He just told me himself you're *not* going."

Elsa ignored her and began dancing around in a circle, waving her pretty arms and chanting, "I'm going to Greece! I'm going to Greece!"

"Shut up! Shut up!" shouted Mara. Elsa continued to prance and flail her arms about. Mara walked over to her in a few quick strides. "Shut *up!*" As she said this, she gave her a good shove. Elsa fell backward, knocking her head against the doorframe.

Mara woke up in a cold sweat. She was in her own bed, her closet door was shut, and everything else was as she remembered leaving it before she went to bed. No father, no hag, no other-Mara, and no Elsa. Only Mara herself, in her own flesh, was there in the bedroom; every shade had flown. She looked at her alarm clock—midnight. "It's over now. They're gone," she told herself as she waited for her racing heart to slow down. She had half a mind to peak into Elsa's room to see if she was all right. Instead, she got out of bed, opened the window, and stood in front of it, letting a gentle breeze soothe her. The air was still warm, but a little drier. Mara listened for a moment, then sighed.

"They stopped," she whispered. No sooner were the words out of her mouth than a long, lone wolf-cry lifted itself into the warm, empty night air. Another answered. Then another. Soon, the plaintive cries of at least ten wolves were raised together in a fellowship of mournful howls. The shades that had visited her that night were gone, but they left a token of their visit—music to stay awake by. Mara went back to bed.

