

## IF ONLY

The sun, a fierce sliver of yellow and orange expanding on the horizon, rose like a pad of butter melting on my cakes, as my grandmother would've said. In this case, I didn't want the breakfast—the coffee cup in my hand suited me fine—but I'd have given just about anything for a little advice. My wife was cheating on me.

I walked down the wooden stairs with a touch of satisfaction. Shelly said to hire a contractor. “You can't build decks,” she said. “You can't” were the only tools in her set for the past few years, since we found out we couldn't have kids, before I suspected of her sleeping around. But not mine. I could, and I *did*. It may have taken me weeks longer than a contractor; it may have cost me a few nasty scratches and dozens of splinters; hell, the fighting may have even cost me my marriage, but in the end—I did it. The walkway to my driveway, however, was another story, the next project after I fixed my marriage. Of the two, I thought I had a better chance of accomplishing the driveway.

“Looks like you got yourself a mess.”

I glanced over at my neighbor Charlie Tupoleski, an average looking man in his mid-thirties except for his shocking hair, which went prematurely white—not gray or

silver, but white—and he liked to grow it as if Albert Einstein’s genius could be possessed through mere image alone. There was an air to him of that same eccentricity, only heightened by the type of humor that left you wanting to punch him in the face and buy him a beer, but more often than not, punch him in the face. He stood at the edge of his unkempt yard bordering my own, the grass grown long to the point of resembling wheat in a field. I offered to cut it almost as often as he pissed me off, and each time he said “Doesn’t look so bad to me” followed by deep, bellowing laughter. I assumed he liked bringing down the resale value on the rest of the houses in the community. It was possible. He was just that kind of guy.

“Looks like it,” I said, absently reaching inside my blue robe to scratch at my stubbly chest. I shaved it a few days earlier—a fool’s gesture I read about in one of those trashy magazines, you know the kind found upfront at the grocery store as you wait in line, the kind you can’t help but stare at because of the half-naked woman on the cover, the kind of cover that says things like “Six easy ways to spice up your sex life.” Yeah, it was one of those articles. I’d hoped to entice my wife into having sex with me. Instead of a bear mounting her, she could have a shaved bear mount her. Unfortunately, regardless of the grooming, she had an aversion to bears in general.

“Coons?” he asked, gesturing to where my garbage lay scattered all over the street.

I stopped scratching and looked at Charlie’s garbage can. His can, unlike mine, sat full and upright.

“No,” I said sighing. “Looks like trolls and goblins.” The garbage had the familiar wet, animal-like stink to it that I’d come to know well over the past six months. A few nights each month I woke to my garbage strewn about—only *my* garbage.

He laughed and took the newspaper out of his mailbox. “Tell me about it. I’d like to help you clean but I got,” he paused to gesture toward his house, first with his head, and then with his hips in a rocking motion, “a little something-something inside.”

I knew all too well what the “something-something’s” were. Despite looking like he’d touched an electrical socket, Charlie had no problems in the lady department. And you wondered why I wanted to punch him in the face?

“Thanks anyway,” I said.

“I feel like I get the Nicholas Sparks bangs,” he remarked, watching me pick up the garbage. “I get drunk and convince them that I’m Ryan Gosling from *The Notebook*, maybe even convince myself for the course of the evening, do wild sexual things, feel younger than I’ve felt in ages, then POOF,” he made a flourish with his hands, “gone, disappear.”

“I lost my mood ring,” I said examining a half-bitten milk carton. “But I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

Charlie guffawed and strode away. I watched the incubus go with a tinge of jealousy, strutting through his overgrown jungle like an albino lion returning to his pride. My own pride was nonexistent in more ways than one. Shelly hadn’t come home last night, again.

I tossed the milk carton on the ground and wondered if I could go back inside, just pretend I hadn't noticed the mess. Maybe the problem would go away—poof, gone, disappear—if I ignored it for long enough.

*More likely, I thought, sipping coffee gone cold, the town will ticket the shit out of me...again.*

“Richard! Richard!”

I looked down at my coffee and then up at the familiar voice of Constance Marsh. Just about every community had their own version of Mrs. Marsh: old, but not really old—as I suspected she was only early to mid-sixties—widowed, and kind in that I'm-so-old-I-must-be-kind type of way, but you could tell she was a tough piece of work in her heyday. She was always in need of assistance for chores and had everyone in the community, including myself, doing everything from lawn work to house work, even though she was as nimble as a woman half her age. And, most of all, Mrs. Marsh was notoriously curious. She knew everything about everyone. In fact, I felt certain she hadn't slept in a few decades. *Vampires don't all have to be young, beautiful, and sparkly*, I thought. Who said there couldn't be elderly vampires?

“Richard!” she shouted, now only a few feet away. “*Look at this mess!*”

“Trolls and goblins,” I said.

“Maybe so,” she agreed soberly, “but...” She trailed off and I straightened. Mrs. Marsh was many things, but apprehensive wasn't one of them.

“What's wrong?”

She pointed toward a small clump of fur caught on a can of peas. “I think you've got something worse than trolls and goblins.”

I looked at the woman and didn't know whether or not to laugh. "Oh yeah?" I hedged. "And what's that?"

"Where's your wife," she whispered.

"What did you say?"

"Come over to my place when you're done and I'll explain." Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and walked away with as much self-importance in her gait as one of her numerous cats.

I exhaled a sigh just as a small stone struck me in the back. I turned in time to catch another in the chest, and a third in the hand not holding my coffee. "Oh, Dylan, come out, come out, wherever you are."

He poked his head out from behind a tree and I half-heartedly tossed a stone in his direction, not actually intending to hit the boy.

His smile, wide and full of mischief, brought another type of cat to mind; unlike Mrs. Marsh's, this was more like the Cheshire Cat—*which would make me what? Alice?* A small grunt escaped my chest at the image of this shaved bear squeezing down a rabbit hole. "Either you're up early, or you're up way past your bed time."

"A little of," he started, falling into a cartwheel. "Both!" he said rising to stand before me. "I camped out in the fort last night."

My eyes traveled to the tree on the side of his house and the precariously built "fort" high off the ground. I'd suggested he move it farther down, but at the end of the day I was his friend, not his father. And his father, well, his father hadn't been around much since the divorce. I helped out when I could. Dylan might need a better father, but

when it came to friends, I thought I did a pretty damn good job. Sad to say, one of my best friends was thirteen years old.

*We grow old only to grow young,* I thought.

“What did the Wicked Witch of Winston Street want?” he asked.

“Hey now,” I chided, face stern. “That’s no way to talk about Mrs. Marsh.”

He rolled his eyes, and we both laughed. I needed it.

“She wants to see me in her office after I get done cleaning up the mess I made,” I said as if I were reporting to the principal.

“Detention?”

“I sense clapping erasers in my future.”

“Clapping erasers,” he teased. “This isn’t prehistoric times, Oh Ancient One.”

“Uh-huh, right.” I began taking another sip of the cold coffee, stopped, considered, and dropped the entire mug into the garbage.

“You’re just asking for it,” he said.

The mug at the bottom of the can was about twelve years old with an image cast on it of me and Shelly in Costa Rica. We were barely twenty-six, celebrating a second honeymoon with our story not yet written, but with enough optimism to assume it would be Happily Ever After.

*If only everyday could’ve been Costa Rica.*

“Just one of those days,” I said. “What’s got you up so early?”

“Your garbage. I heard something tearing it apart this morning, something big. Didn’t see what it was though, too dark.”

I studied his face, searching for the joke. He was serious. He’d been spooked.

“Just trolls and goblins,” I said with less reassurance than I intended.

He nodded once then helped me pick up the mess. I appreciated the assistance, not because I wasn't capable of cleaning the garbage on my own, but because someone cared enough to help. *I'm not alone*. I was surprised at how much comfort I derived from the thought. It brought to mind the afternoon Shelly and I went on a walk following the wake of a winter blizzard, bundled in layers, the snow undisturbed by plow trucks or anyone other than us. We were alone, but we were together.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Basketball?”

I made an exaggerated chopping motion at my neck. “Assuming I survive Mrs. Marsh's guillotine.”

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The inside of Mrs. Marsh's parlor was exactly as you would imagine: dimly lit, too many doilies, and the strong scent of ammonia and baked goods intermingled into a distinct odor of death.

“Tea?” she asked sitting on the sofa across from me. A large calico cat jumped onto her lap and she smoothed its fur with a rhythmic motion while two other black cats planted themselves like sentries at her feet.

I leaned into the well-worn leather recliner and groaned from the sheer relief of it before remembering where I was, forcing myself to sit up straight. “Uh, no, thank you,” I said.

“You don't have to be formal on my account. That chair belonged to my late-husband, who was also a Dick, no pun intended. Enjoy it.”

Needing no more encouragement, I sank into the seat and reveled in the comfort. If Heaven were a chair then my ass lived a good life.

“He died in that chair, bless his soul,” she said as if sensing my thoughts.

I bolted to my feet and Mrs. Marsh only laughed a soft, melodic sound, a fairytale manifest. The two black cats didn’t move, continuing to stare straight ahead like we were at Buckingham Palace, but the fat calico on her lap wheezed as if snickering at my expense. “I’m joking. Just a bit of fun. He died in the hospital from consumption, many years ago. Please, sit.”

I sat down with a huff. I wasn’t in the mood for tea, but I’d have gladly taken a beer. Of course, asking Mrs. Marsh for a beer would’ve been the same as letting the entire neighborhood infer I had a drinking problem.

“So Richard,” she began in a businesslike tone that tensed my body in spite of the cushioning. “I’ve noticed your wife’s *nocturnal* habits.”

“Excuse me?”

“She leaves before you get home from work and doesn’t return until the next morning.” She held up a gnarled finger for emphasis. “A few nights each month for the past six months.”

I eyed Mrs. Marsh, uneasy at the turn of the conversation. “I’m aware.”

“And has she told you where she’s been?”

I felt my face redden. “Not that it’s any of your business,” I sputtered, “but she has girls’ night out.”

Mrs. Marsh peered at me through her thick, gold-rimmed glasses, face expressionless, but the cat on her lap stirred in agitation and leapt off with a cry. The two



black ones remained still while another that'd been circling my legs hissed and batted my calf with a clawed swipe. I recoiled more in shock than pain, but Mrs. Marsh paid neither the cats nor my reaction any attention.

“Nights,” she corrected. “Plural. Doesn't it seem a little strange to you that she's out *all* night?”

I rose from the chair, towering over the diminutive woman. Regardless of my stance, Mrs. Marsh seemed unflappable. “What're you getting at?” It was one thing for me to harbor my own suspicions about my wife. It was quite another for a nosy neighbor with nothing better to do in her spare time than snoop and gossip.

My mouth opened to say just that when Mrs. Marsh cut in. “Your wife's disappearance has been going on the exact same time as your garbage problem. And both events occur when the moon is full.”

“And?”

“And,” she said rising to walk over to a built-in bookshelf on the wall. It was filled with many books, most of which bore the plain, unjacketed appearance of age. “Sure you don't want that cup of tea?” she asked while searching.

“No, thank you.”

“Suit yours—ah! Here it is!” she exclaimed, clasping a plain, leather bound volume and handing it to me.

There was no title on the spine and it began on the contents page. I cursorily scanned various chapter titles—Succubus/Incubus Incursions, Feline Transfiguration—before my eyes rested on Nocturnal Predators.

“Page 164,” she said, as if again reading my mind.

I glanced up at her and then down at the book. I flipped to the page and read the title—Werewolves. All of the anger that'd been building suddenly exploded into a gale of laughter that sent all of the cats in the room running for the kitchen. I doubled over, clutching my stomach from the force of it, letting the book fall.

Mrs. Marsh sprang forward, fast as any of her felines, and scooped the book up before it hit the floor. "Careful," she snapped. My outburst withered under her cool gaze. "This has been in my family for generations. It's irreplaceable."

I lowered my head. "I'm sorry."

"No harm done." She cradled the book to her chest like an infant. I hesitated to think if there *had* been harm done. "The point is that I think your wife has some explaining to do."

One moment I laughed at her, and the next I wanted to weep. I wanted to cry for this old woman with nothing but her cats and curiosity for company. Mingled with that sorrow was disgust for having thought so negatively of her. *Who am I judge?* I knew next to nothing about her. All I knew with any certainty was that Mrs. Marsh had lost her mind and, for half a heartbeat that stretched for an eternity, I desperately wanted to join her.

The beauty in madness, the pleasure of insanity, the simple joy of letting go—oh yes, I envied Mrs. Marsh. If only there were trolls and goblins. If only my neighbor were an incubus. If only Mrs. Marsh were a witch. If only my wife were a werewolf. If only fantasy weren't just that—a fantasy. If only.

"That's a nice dream, Mrs. Marsh." I forced a smile. "I wish I could share it with you."

Reaching up with an age-mottled hand, she patted my cheek like my own grandmother did when I was a boy. Then she pulled something out of her apron pocket and pressed it into my palm.

“You’ll know what to do,” she said.

I looked at my hand and felt the weight of what she suggested tugging me downward.

“I don’t know who turned her,” she said. “It could’ve happened before you were married, probably so. The primal aggression builds for years, for a lifetime, until it eventually manifests physically, page 166. Regardless of the how, she’ll try to turn you, and soon.” The cats returned, circling us, crying in unison, demanding I listen, demanding I obey. “After all, wolves mate for life.”

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Shelly pulled into our driveway as I started across the street, stepping out on unsteady legs with her long, brown hair disheveled like she had a wild night. In contrast, her white shirt and jeans were clean as if they’d hardly been worn. I bit my tongue at the thought. She stood looking at the garbage can, once again stacked neatly with no trace of the previous night’s disaster.

I walked up next to her, wordlessly leaning down to kiss her cheek in a rote display of affection perfected over fifteen years of marriage. I wrinkled my nose at the animal-like stink, unsure if it was Shelly or the garbage. She turned her brown eyes to mine and smiled. In it was something sad and apologetic, confirming my fear that a part of her life had evolved beyond me.

Her small hand took my own larger paw in hers, the one still clutching Mrs. Marsh's latest chore. She raised my hand to her lips and kissed the back. The gesture watered my eyes, but from love or from sadness? Either way my chest ached as she walked away, wondering if it was for the last time. She stopped at the foot of the stairs, ran her hand along the railing, and turned to look back at me.

"I should've said something sooner and I'm sorry," she began.

I braced myself for what we both knew would happen. She'd been cheating, and now she was leaving.

"But this deck really did come out beautiful."

My mouth opened then closed. I cleared my throat. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. And thank you for cleaning up the mess," she added as if it were an afterthought. "Why don't you come out with me tonight? I have something I'd like to show you."

The chore felt hot in my hand, burning itself into my palm as I squeezed. But I thought of Mrs. Marsh's words, *wolves mate for life*, and found myself saying "Sure, I'd love that."

I watched her go into the house, and for a long moment I wondered. Leaning into the garbage, I rifled through it until I found the mug, slightly cracked in the handle, although not obvious, nothing worse than what happened over time to any mug, nothing a little glue couldn't fix. I made as if to toss the silver bullet in its place but stopped, considered, and tucked it into my pocket.

[END]