

## A Stranger's Breath in the Lamplight

It was dark when I awoke; darker than any night I'd seen outside of my home, and I knew that I was no longer in the city. The purple glow of a light polluted sky had been replaced by a moonless blanket of blackness, spotted with bright swirls and dots of celestial bodies. It was the kind of sky that would normally have been beautiful under other circumstances. However, as I looked at the clear and starry sky, my mind kept returning to something I had learned as a child; that the stars shining so brightly and vibrantly were mostly long-dead. All the vitality that met my eyes was merely an illusion; the corpses of what may have once hosted entire solar systems, perhaps even sustained life like our own sun. Yet now, it was just a mawkish façade upon death.

I looked around me at the dusty ground and the dried shrubs and gnarled, leafless trees. Everything that my eyes could make out appeared as a silhouette in blue or black or purple, for my eyes, in the dark, were not able to make out the colors of the objects around me. I tried to paint everything in my mind; to imagine what it would have looked like in the light, but everything only showed brown and dusty; even the leaves were a dull gray.

In the distance, I saw the glow of a near-antiquated streetlight; the kind that farmers use to mark their driveways; the kind that poke through shrouds of fog in the darkness of the countryside like dim, yellow phantasms. I had driven past these electric lanterns at night, and viewed them uneasily from the interstate: little proofs of civilization dropped randomly among the woodlands or fields. They always caused me to wonder whose darkness they were intended to eradicate, or if they were merely put there as colonial outposts of our species, not serving any real purpose other than to declare humanity's dominion over the forces of nature and darkness. Occasionally, in passing, I would see somebody strolling beneath them from the brief end of the darkness to the beginning, and I would wonder, as a child, whether these lonesome figures were ghosts.

These feelings trickled through me as I approached the glow of the street lamp, manifesting as tepid trembling on my spine and a thick haze around my already limited perceptions. I distrusted everything about the light, and, on a level of consciousness half-submerged, I distrusted those for whom (or by whom) the light had been constructed to an even greater extent. If I had known where I had awoken, or had been able to see anything around me with some clarity, I would not have gone closer. Yet I knew it had to be done. I could not remember how I'd gotten here, but some intuition or memory told me that this had happened to me before, and that I needed to find somebody who could help me.

As I got closer to the light, I could see the area it illuminated, where a few insects buzzed closer to the bulb, braving the queer cold of the summer night. (Or was it rare? Perhaps this was just what summer was like in whatever place this was. Or perhaps I'd slept right through summer and this chill I felt belonged more appropriately to late autumn or early winter. There was no way to tell.) I saw a cloud of breath pressing the still air from behind the lamppost where some stranger stood. The cloud of respiratory condensation flashed fingers of momentary fog that pointed in my direction, and I felt that the stranger was watching me in the dark. But how could they see me past the light?

With each step, I became more reluctant to take the next. If the darkness in which I had awoken felt consuming, the light felt like an intestinal acid, and fear began to set in that I would be dissolved, digested, spit out as waste should I step into it. I slowed my pace, then crouched darkling behind a tree. And there I watched the breath, waiting for an owner to emerge.

Together, we fed the distance between us with our stagnancy; and I wondered what sort of meeting this was that would not occur. I wondered how to describe one met in the darkness, whom you would never really know, but with whom you shared the intimacy only possible for one lost in the woods who sees a cloud of hot breath pressing against the cold, crisp air of a strange night and dares

not approach. For, despite being lost and alone; despite needing help, I could not bring myself to advance.

I could feel the breathing stranger watching me, waiting for me to emerge. Yet I remained crouched, waiting for something, anything, to return me to the familiar light of day. However, I wondered what safety it would bring, or if it would only serve to turn blue trees brown and purple soil to gray dust. I wondered what familiarity there was to be found in the daylight, and how many times I had been in the darkness before.