

## Fairy Tale

Once upon a time, at the stroke of 2 AM, I awoke from troubled dreams and stared into the gloom of my studio apartment in my crumbling building in the East Village of Manhattan. Everything seemed draped in darkness, and there was this weird hush, like I was trapped in a sensory deprivation chamber. For a while, I kept perfectly still, my skin tingling, a blood vessel pulsating in my temple. Finally, when I couldn't stand it a second longer, I glanced around, at the murky radiator and the outline of the bathroom door, and then, kind of randomly, focused in on the shadows across the room, which flickered and swirled, like they were trying to mesmerize me. Light trickled in from under the window shade, and my stomach tightened, and I started feeling funny in the head. While I gaped, my heart pounding, the shadows changed, taking on definite shapes. My hands shook and my lips formed words. Finally, I whispered, "Wolves."

The shadows glided past, spreading out like they were gearing up for an attack, and I thought about Little Red Riding Hood and The Boy Who Cried Wolf. I sniffed the air and looked out for glistening fangs and listened for the scrape of claws. When I thought I saw yellow eyes, my teeth chattered, and I made the sign of the cross, then closed my own eyes and pulled my velvet plush heated throw blanket up to my chin so I could escape back into the shelter of sleep before I got mauled. But, after maybe thirty minutes, when it became clear that I wasn't going to get any shut-eye, I tried to reassure myself. *Wolves, yeah, that's a good one, that's crazier than crazy. Hey, listen up, there are absolutely positively no wolves in the borough of Manhattan,*

*there haven't been for over two centuries, and even if there did happen to be a few holdouts in a cave somewhere off the FDR drive, you always keep the chain on the door at night, remember, and you live on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor, for Christ's sake, so what are they going to do, lope their way up the side of the building and bite their way in through the walls?*

Not entirely convinced, I looked around carefully, just to be dead certain that there were in fact no wolves, foxes, jackals, or even dingoes lying in wait, then shoved aside the bedrail which protected me from falls – like that time when I'd broken my toe and couldn't get up from the splintery floor – used my elbows to lever myself up from my frayed pillowtop mattress, and shuffled quickly across the floor to turn on my halogen lamp. Instantly, the wolf shadows winked out, and my back-support chair and space heater and cardboard boxes were all bathed in an unearthly glow, everything so strange and beautiful that tears came into my eyes.

Time dripped like mercury, the night crawling towards daybreak, and it was impossible to tell whether five minutes had elapsed or an hour. The air shimmered and the radiator clanked. I glanced at my digital clock with the green numerals, then forgot what I'd just seen. I glanced again and forgot again. There was something important out there which I couldn't quite get hold of. Gradually, it took the form of a blinking neon sign, and my mouth read slowly, **What's there to do?** My hands shook, and my upper lip twitched. It was of utmost importance that I find the solution to this riddle, almost like my salvation depended on it. My brain swirled like a pinwheel, looking for something, anything, in this hall of mirrors. Finding nothing except shadows and echoes, I began to panic, shuffling the deck of playing cards that passed for my mind. Over and over, I asked myself, "What to do? What to do?"

Then, just as I was drowning in darkness, radiance flooded my mind. "I've got it," I whispered. "I'll study the walls." Yes, it was true that this was only a stopgap measure, and the

walls in question were a bit gray and mottled, but, by God, they were still plenty white enough, at least for my modest purposes. For about fifteen minutes, I scanned them, taking stock of the ridges, noting the stains and gradations of color, approximating height and breath, drawing a mental map of how to proceed. After reaching out and running my palm over the nearest surface, I made my decision. Assuming the role of drill sergeant, after saluting myself, I barked out, “Action must be taken.”

Using the off-white walls as background, I watched floaters in my eyes go round and round, recalling what my college roommate had once told me, “Hey, you’ve got flies in your eyes,” and it seemed he had proven to be a prophet. During my preliminary exercise, I noticed there were quite a few real spots on the walls, and, shifting gears, I selected one among the many, bearing in mind the fact that spots are like snowflakes, no two being identical, and after a couple of hours of meditation, came to love the speck I had selected as my special one.

The sound of a car horn brought the room back into focus. There were important things to be done, and I had to act quickly, before the sun burned down the night. Tearing myself away from my love-fleck before I became an inspiration for a sonnet, I limped over on numb feet to the window, pulled the string that lifted the dirty shade, looked down twelve stories to the dark patches of snow clumped here and there on the sidewalk, and watched the pedestrians hurrying along in their down parkas like a few lonely ants. It was like a scene from one of those films Orson Welles starred in, which one, come on now, think, oh yeah, *The Third Man*. I searched the landscape, hunting with the tentacles of my mind for that scrap of inspiration which lay just beyond reach, thinking, “What’s there to do? What’s there to do?”

Suddenly, I shrieked, “By God, I could jump,” and my inner darkness blew away, replaced by cathedral light. Because, it was true, if I could only get up the nerve, that would

solve the problem once and for all, and I could make all my troubles fly to the four corners, *and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying*. And who was going to stop me? And as for all those naysayers who, after the fact, would “Tsk, tsk,” shaking their bony fingers, muttering about taking the easy way out, who were they to pass judgment? Had they ever walked a mile in my running shoes, particularly with one of the heels missing? Hadn’t they ever heard of, *Let he who is without sin cast the first stone?*

I grabbed the bars and shook them, ecstatic, preparing to take the eternal plunge, chanting, “Hey, hey, what you say, let’s scare the gloom away.” But, noticing what my hands were gripping onto, confusion engulfed me. *Bars, what bars?* Because, even though I’d been living here longer than a cave painting, I’d never before noticed bars. What was this? Was I an inmate of a nuthouse? It couldn’t be, because I went out to get a delicious black-and-white cookie from the corner deli almost every afternoon. I examined the bars more closely, seeing the shadow of what looked like a witch on a broomstick fly across the crescent moon. Then I flushed with outrage, because, as it turned out, the bars were child bars, and this wasn’t acceptable, because I was neither a child nor ever had begat one. But, after a while, time began to flow like pastel watercolors, and everything was all right, the genie back in the bottle, and I could comprehend the whole wide universe in a single blade of grass.

After a brief lull, like I was sprawled out in the eye of a hurricane, the damnable question **What’s there to do?** once again came a’ knocking. But now, for some inexplicable reason, I couldn’t get my head on straight and had no answer, shivering, fumbling around for my thermometer and my bottle of Advil, anticipating the long hours stretching ahead, feeling terror and a sense of impending doom. But then, right at the last, as my life forces ebbed, dissolving into the chill of endless night, I did finally figure out that magical way to occupy myself, now

and forever, which would give my life hope and purpose, and it was like stepping into nirvana; because, if the truth be told, that ultimate thing to do was built right into every mother's son, I kid you not; and so, with a tiny voice dissenting, *No, no, you mustn't, not that, please don't, I beg you kind sir, anything but that, you're about to open a whole bag of trouble*, I went ahead and took it out. Yes, you heard me right, I took it out, by God I sure did, what of it, and don't get all finicky and moralistic on me, as if you don't do it all the time, sure, right, regardless of your gender or political orientation.

Okay, I took it out and did with it what you do with it when you take it out, and it took control of me like the heroin I'd never shot up, and it sure beat gorging myself on granola bars, or watching *Macbeth* on YouTube, or even listening to the Beatles sing *Helter Skelter*, and I did it on and on, and, with no time elapsed, it was yesterday, and all my troubles seemed so far away. But, just when it was on the verge of carrying me over the rainbow, like a lightning bolt out of the clear blue sky, it began to flag and droop and sputter and finally went out of commission altogether, while I stared in disbelief, muttering, "Hey, little fellow, what gives?"

Since this had never happened before, horror flooded me, like I'd been caught with my pants down, and not just 'so to speak'. But, since the glass was always half full and a stitch in time saved nine, I told myself, *No need to panic, you've still got plenty of flapjacks left on your griddle*. I tried thinking unclean thoughts. I anointed it with balms and unguents. I resorted to mechanical devices that I had secreted from a store on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I anthropomorphized it, engaging it in pleasantries, like "Hey, Maypole, how's it hanging?" and "What's up, Wee Willie Wonder?" I tried to stud shame it, saying, "I don't mean to speak unkindly, but the somber truth is that you've always been a rather poor excuse for a love missile." When it failed to respond, the strangest thing happened: I lost my cool for a second, brandishing a bread knife that happened to

be within reach on the Coca-Cola stained computer table, telling it, “You better watch yourself.” But it continued ignoring me, like I, not some character in a book, was the real invisible man. Finally, like I’d completely lost my reality and forevermore I’d live in a world of dysfunction, I muttered to it, “You know, you’re not very nice sometimes,” then quickly retracted with, “Okay, I didn’t mean it already, haven’t you ever said something you regretted, at least once in your whole charmed life?” put it away, and slumped down into my tottering back chair. And, once again, like a bad penny, the eternal question, ‘What’s there to do,’ turned up at my doorstep.

I checked my inbox on my computer, which was empty except for ads from dating services, and listened to the beginning of three audiobooks and watched a Mick Jagger video on YouTube, where he was singing, “I’m so hot for you, and you’re so cold.” I played a game of chess on the computer, setting it at the Grand Master level, and after it decapitated my King, instead of getting upset like I usually would, I felt oddly invigorated, like I’d just chowed down a cucumber sandwich. I tugged on my earlobes and twiddled my thumbs. Then, recalling that winners never quit and quitters never win, I decided to give it a go, one last time.

To be on the safe side, I took a time out to think about butt cheeks and bazoozers and petticoats and Patricias and, although I’m a little ashamed to admit it, also about that tough kid named Steve Connor at the overnight YMCA camp I went to when I was eleven, who told me, “I play with it every night, want to watch?” Holding all these images in my brain simultaneously, I tried tugging on it, hoping that I could at least get it to twitch, but it just dropped back down like a mournful mushroom. I tried stroking it, talking to it, telling it not to be scared, because it was just me, and I would never hurt it, because I just wasn’t that kind of fellow, and I only wanted what was best for it, and I adored it, and couldn’t it, after all the years, finally cherish me in return, but it remained cold as an ice princess. Feeling a flash of chagrin, exhausted and spent,

considering the hideous blasphemy, *Maybe the glass really is half empty*, I said, “Enough is enough.” And then all these bad thoughts flooded my brain.

In the early years, it had caused me endless misery with its neediness, and I, most generous in spirit, had always accommodated it, in basements and bathrooms and even once on a Greyhound bus, and, for this alone, it owed me big time. Next came the girl problems, and whenever one of those ever so subtle creatures had showed it the slightest attention, it had infected me with crazy love sickness, freaking me out many a time. And, well, the rest is a strange story, the gist of it being that, either directly or indirectly, it’d been responsible for me hurting my back and compromising my career and losing my marbles, I was sure of all this to a moral certainty; that is, dare I say it, that my nefarious wand had always been the problem, not the solution. And now, at the last, when my ship had sunk, when, for once, I needed its comfort and consolation more than life itself, in a fit of perversity, it had decided to go AWOL on me.

No longer knowing where to turn, feeling that existence no longer had purpose and that I was locked into the iron grip of karma, and perhaps, just maybe in a past life, I had committed unspeakable acts of a sexual nature, I turned down my lamp and shuddered in the shadows.

Finally, as light faded and the eternal clock ticked and snow outside my window began to fall, guidance came miraculously to me in the form of a scriptural verse I recalled from the distant past. *And if thy right eye cause thee to fall, pluck it out and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.*

Now there was really no longer any doubt that one of my members, arguably the most important, had indeed offended me, and I was quite capable of reasoning by analogy, and just outside the apartment was the garbage disposal chute, and really, when you stop to think about it, what choice did I have, because, long ago, like some fiend, it had taken control of my immortal soul, and so, in order to break the evil spell, once and for all, I picked up the bread knife and stretched my manly part like it was on the rack and...

Come on now, get real, I mean, you didn't really believe I'd, you must be from another planet if you'd think I'd actually, I mean, didn't you read the title of the story, and that isn't just a toe or a finger or a lock of hair we're talking about, that's the last thing I'd ever do, yes, I know I've been sounding a little crazy, but that would be just plain nutso, I mean, I'm religious and all, but ...

The trip to the emergency room was kind of gruesome, doctors running around like a pack of wild monkeys, all the nurses' eyes bugging out, and, to be honest with you, it really did get me down for quite a while; but in the end, after years of therapy, I came to realize that this truly was the best of all possible worlds, and you really could shake off the grip of karma, that is, if you were willing to pay the price. I also came to see that my act had been archetypal and pretty near approaching symbolic, yeah, right, tell it, and, as I'd learned in my college course on fairytales, symbolism is always the main dish at the lunch counter. To kind of round off the charmed circle of my life, to make lemonade out of the lemons, I wrote a million-dollar bestseller on Super Sex for Atypical Amputees, and bought myself a five-bedroom house in Scarsdale with a stone fireplace and French doors, and married Miss Congeniality, who led



support groups for people with similar self-inflicted disabilities, and naturally we lived happily ever after.

The End