

# Spectres

The gravel crunched coldy beneath his feet. Looking down the little boy wondered at the different sounds walking made on the frozen gravel path.

The full moon gave the ground a pearlescent glow as his footsteps echoed in the cold. He added the sounds and colors to his seven year old memory. They seemed important somehow. Looking up at the back of his walking companion just ahead of him he wondered if the old man ever got cold, he certainly didn't have much in the way of a coat.

Picking up his pace a little the boy drew closer, "Aren't you cold?"

The old man stopped and looked down at the boy, "No, I'm not cold," he said in a deep baritone voice, "but if you are you can go back to the house, no point to freeze yourself." Looking back at the house the boy saw the yellow glow of the lights through the windows. The whole family was there, everybody settling in for the evening after a big Christmas dinner.

The old white two-story house felt warm, even at this distance. He looked back at the old man; he had taken out his tobacco pouch and was slowly filling his old briar pipe. The house and its warmth tugged at the boy, a feeling of longing, almost an ache for the warmth and family there. But something out here pulled at him as well, something new, wild somehow. Suddenly he felt sad as though the people inside were separated from him by a glass wall, a wall only he could see through. A flame burst into his consciousness, the old man had lit his pipe with a kitchen match.

"We better keep moving then, we don't want them to find us in the morning frozen out here like a couple of statues." He grinned around the stem of the pipe and let out a billowy cloud of smoke which steamed in the cold air. "It'll be warmer in the barn." The boy grinned slightly and started his march toward the old barn again, almost there. The house would have to wait.



Reaching the doors of the old barn the old man unhooked the chain that held the two great front doors closed and swung one

of them back. The little boy marveled at the doors in the glistening light of the moon, they seemed so huge to his small height. Stepping inside the old man walked into the darkness and soon a single bare bulb illuminated the interior of the barn. He was right, thought the boy, it is warmer in here. The old man opened the door of the corncrib and motioned for the boy to come over. "Sit up here on the doorsill out of the way, you don't want to get stepped on".

The boy watched quietly as the old man went back and forth with cans of feed from the old copper feed barrel just inside the crib to each of the stalls. After putting feed into each trough he closed the barrel and reached over beside the door. Waiting there were his walking sticks.

"Do you think you need a stick," he asked, "these old cows can get pretty rambunctious sometimes." There was a twinkle in those ice blue eyes. The boys thought for a moment. "I might, you never know."

"Well, here then, you take this one," pulling out a long hickory stick about an inch in diameter. Taking the stick in his hands the boy looked curiously at the top of it. While the stick as a whole wasn't anything unusual the top seemed to converge upward into a shape that seemed familiar somehow.

"What's this on top," the boy asked, "it looks like a dog's paw or something."

The old man stopped and took a drag on his pipe, "Well, look at it close, and you tell me what it's supposed to be."

Without thinking the little boy replied, "It's a foxes paw isn't it." Almost instantly he wondered where the words had come from, he had never seen a live fox and not many pictures of them either. After thinking a moment he was just about to correct himself when the old man interrupted.

"That's right," he said quietly, "there aren't very many people who could see that." He turned and walked quickly out of sight towards the back of the barn. The boy heard the rear doors protesting on their squeaky hinges as they opened to the moon and the night. Soon the first of the cows came in, blinking in the light. She seemed to stretch on forever to the small boy. She stopped just short of the first stall and turned towards him. Stretching out her neck she sniffed at his coat and then snorted a cloud of musty breath at him. She turned and ambled gently into the open stall door. Soon, four more were ensconced in their respective stalls. Only the sounds of sweet feed being chewed and shifting feet could be heard from them now.

The old man hadn't returned so the boy slipped down from his perch and with is stick made his way towards the back of the old barn. Through the open doors he could see the outline of the man standing against the moonlight. He walked out the doors and navigated his way over the hilly frozen muck to stand next to him. The old man squatted down holding his stick in front of him for support. The little boy did the same; it felt very natural to him.

They sat silently like that for a time. The little boy looked at the pines up the hollow. You could only see the dark outline of their forms. Their shoulders hunched up against the cold clear December sky, sheltering the ground beneath their feet. Odd sensations picked at the boy's mind. He felt as if his thoughts were being frozen in the cold. He looked at the little puffs of white his breath made in the air. He could hear the silence. He strained his hearing to catch a whiff of sound from the barn, the cows, but there was nothing. Everything, he thought, has stopped. Just then the old man shifted his weight and let out a small puff of smoke from his pipe. Taking it from his mouth he asked with out turning, "How do you like the stick".

"It's fine," said the boy.

"It suits you," said the old man, "it will be here and anytime you're here you can use it."

The little boy thought this over for a moment. He supposed this meant the stick was his, but leaving something behind that was yours was a concept he couldn't quite grasp. Then another question entered his mind and he asked, "Will it always suit me do you think".



"No, not always," said the old man. The boy had his next question ready, but the old man answered it before he could speak. "Someday you'll pick it up and nothing will be there except memories, then you will know it no longer suits you, it will be time to move on."

The boy pondered this, somehow it made no sense when he thought of the words and yet it made so much sense to him that it caused his heart to ache. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his toes burned from the cold, but it felt reassuring. He thought of the big white house just up the hill and the people there, but now it didn't seem warm, it seemed far away and the people only shadows. He tried to remember their faces... nothing came.

"I thought I saw something up there under the pine trees," said the old man. He spoke this in a deep whisper as though someone might overhear. The boy snapped his gaze back to the old stand of pines that stood thick up on the hollow. The old man spoke again, this time in even a lower voice, the boy strained to hear the words while never taking his gaze off the pines. "I'm not sure what it was, my eyes are old, yours are young though, maybe you can tell what it is, can you see it?"

"Where?" the little boy whispered urgently. He could feel the hair on his neck beginning to rise. He couldn't see anything but he was sure something was out there, what was it; a wildcat maybe, or mountain panther, he has heard about those. He had been told they sounded like a woman screaming. He strained to both see and hear, but there was nothing but silence and darkness under the pines.

"Look into the darkest part of the shadows up there," said the old man. This time he

spoke softly but not quite a whisper. The boy felt a calmness spread over him from the sounds of that voice. He looked now into the blackest part of the shadows cast by an icy pearl of a moon. He strained his vision until nothing was in it except those shadows. He felt a pop like wood cracking nearby, he felt it, he knew he didn't hear it, just felt it, but before his mind could play with this new information he saw it. A small shimmering light floated gently at the base of the deepest shadows. Then another and another and another until there were four of them. It looked as though four stars had escaped from the cold night sky and sought shelter under those pines. They floated slowly back and forth, up and down.

"What's up there?" said the old man. The sound of his voice, even though quiet, went through the boy like a gunshot. The boy looked at the old man's face. There was intensity in his eyes he had not seen before. They looked like blue diamonds suspended there in the darkness of his face, reflecting the moonlight outward onto the world. "I'm not sure," the boy stammered, "it looked like little lights to me." He glanced back at the pines, only darkness now, just like before.

The old man puffed on his pipe, "Little lights you say, well, that's what I thought I saw. Do you suppose somebody was up there with a flashlight?" The boy could see the muscles in his face poised to make a grin.

"I don't think so," said the boy.

"Neither do I," said the old man and with that he rose and turned back towards the barn. "We had better get you back to the house before your feet freeze off, that would never do." He smiled.

"But what were those lights?" asked the boy, standing and trying without much success to feel his toes.

They walked back across the muck and into the barn, "I don't know," said the old man, "what do you think they were?" The little boy allowed that he didn't know either.

The old man began opening the stall doors and the cattle, fat from their meal, began their slow bump and grind out the doors to the barn lot. He closed the doors to all the stalls and he and the boy walked back to the front of the barn. Switching off the single bulb the old man finally asked matter of factly, "They didn't scare you did they?"

"Yes, they were pretty scary at first," said the boy.



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gladly die before I let that happen." The words, though spoken without any great emotion, struck the little boy like a hammer blow. He knew this was not an idle statement, he wasn't sure how he knew, but he knew. The old man chained up the door to the barn and turned to walk back towards the house.

"I still don't know what those lights were," the boy said, almost whining for an answer.

The old man relit his pipe and continued his slow climb up the gravel path. "Maybe someday you'll go and find out," he said. The boy thought about this and decided that yes, maybe someday he would find out, but not now, now seemed wrong. He knew this was something he wouldn't tell anyone about even though the old man never said anything was a secret, the little boy just knew, and knowing made him feel alive.

The old man began singing softly as they made their way up the hill, "Swing low, sweeeeet chariot, comin' for to carry me home." The words vibrated in the little boy's chest and touched something; he felt his heart ache again. He wondered briefly about the lights in the shadow of the pines.

He looked down at the gravel under his feet and listened to the sound they made in the frozen light. He would be home soon.