

Night Laughter

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The thing is, it's just that you start to hate the daytime. All the bad things happen during the day: rush hour, lines at the bank, unwanted phone calls, junk mail, overworked people being rotten to each other. Night is the time for lovers, for reading alone by lamplight, for dancing, for cool breezes. It doesn't matter if your blood is hot or cold; it's the time for you.

"Come on," I say, tugging at his wrist, "come on, let's have fun!" He holds back, reluctant. "Come on, let's dance!"

All over the city the lights are blinking off and on all the time. Night laughter. "Come on into the night!"

"Crazy," he says, "that's what you are."

Rich night-time laughter bubbles in me. I let a little of it show in the corners of my mouth to scare him. He's scared. He says, "You wanna dance?"

I turn away, shrug nonchalantly. "Nah, not really."

"You wanna... go for a ride?"

"Nah," I lick my lips, trite, unmistakable. "Let's go for a walk. In the park."

"No one's in the park at this hour."

"We'll be. Just the two of us, alone. With the long paths all to ourselves."

He rises, follows. The night is like that.

He's wearing a good suit, the best he's got. The night's the time for dressing up, dressing high, dressing fine. Your real night clothes, those are the pressed black and starched white that a gentleman wore, with maybe a touch of gold or a bright ribbon sash setting it off. And a woman was always sleek and bright, lean and clean as a new machine, streamlined as a movie queen. My dress is like that; it clings and swirls so smooth, so long. I stride along beside him in my spiky heels, like a thoroughbred horse with tiny goat's hoofs. Long ago, in Achaea, God wore goat's hoofs and played the pipes all night long. Pipes of reed, like the mouth of a saxophone, blowing long and lonely down the wind between the standing trees.

The trees of the park are sparse, hanging over us in ordered rows, dark and tall as the street lamps between them, but under the trees is shadow. The circles of light, when you come to them, are bright enough to read by. Little insects buzz and flutter against their haloes.

Bums are asleep on the benches; poor guys, don't even know if it's night or day. I always avoid them. The only thing they want is money; they never knew how to have a good time, or they've forgotten how. I knew someone once who couldn't bear the light of day, quite right. He'd get out of his white jacket and into a velvet dressing-gown, put on dark glasses and retire from the sunrise like poison, while we

watched the lights going out in strings across the park, and he'd be making his jokes about what to do with the waking birds and their noise. Owl, I called him, and he called me Mouse. But finally he couldn't take it any more, he took to sucking red life out of a wine bottle with thick glass, green as sunshades, and he lost the taste for real life altogether; now for all I know he's one of the bums on the benches. They know they're safe: we won't touch them if we don't have to.

This man I'm with, he keeps darting his eyes left and right, as if he's looking for a cop or a junkie or a mugger. I take his arm, press up against him. "You're cold," he says.

I flip my silver scarf twice around my throat. "No, I'm not."

Lights from the passing cars streak our path. I tilt my head back, eyes veiled against the glare of sky, the light bouncing off the clouds.

He says, "I think I see my office. There, over the trees."

I lead him deeper into the darkness, towards the boat pond.

He says, "Y'know it's really dangerous in here," coming all the time along with me.

I kick off my shoes, they go shooting up like silver rockets out over the old lake. My feet press the damp earth, soft and cool, perfect night feeling. Not just earth under them; there's old cigarette stubs mouldering into clay and hard edges of glass and a little bird's bone.

Considerately I lean my back against a tree, unwrap my scarf and smile one of my dream smiles.

"Cigarette?" I ask huskily. He fumbles in his pocket, holds the white stick out to me; I just lean there, holding the pose, and finally he places the end between my polished lips. I look up sultry through my eyelashes, and he produces a light.

Oh, the gorgeousness of that tiny flame, orange and strong in the darkness! You don't get orange like that by daylight. I suck it to a perfect scarlet circle on the end of my cigarette, and then I give it back to him, trailing its ghostly wisp of smoke. Automatically he smokes it.

Automatic, still too nervous. He doesn't know how to have a good time! He was a mistake, a good-looking mistake. But then, not every night is perfect. I sigh so quietly only the wind hears me. Frogs are croaking in the pond, competing with crickets for airspace over the distant traffic roar. Another good night, opening itself to me. All you have to do is want it.

"C'mere," I say in my husky dusky cigarette voice. His tie so neatly tied, his shoes so clean they catch the little light on their rounded surface... He walks towards me. The expression on his face is steadier, more hopeful: here at last is something he thinks he'll understand. He buries his face in my neck. My white arms glow around his shoulders.

He's all pressed into me now, I'm like sandwich filling between him and the tree.

There's bubble of laughter in my throat; I'm thinking, What would happen if I swiftly stepped aside and all his hard softness were pressing against bark? But I just shift my weight, enjoying the way he picks up on it, shifting his body to conform to me. Now he likes the night. Now his hands have some life in them, running the maze between my dress and my skin. With my fingertips I touch his ears, his jaw, the rim of his collar, while he presses, presses, his breath playing like a brassy syncopated band, his life pulsing hard, trying to burst through his clothes. Owl always said, Let them do that.

He's working my dress up around my waist. His hands are hot. Ah, he's happy. He's fumbling with his buckle. I breathe on him and make him laugh.

"Fun?" I ask.

"Mm-hmm."

"You're having a good time now."

I tickle the base of his throat and he throws back his head, face joyous in the mercury-coloured cloudlight. Night laughter rises in me, too strong any more to be contained. It wells through my mouth and fixes on his throat, laughter hard and sharp as the edge of a champagne glass, wet and bright as a puddle in neon.

It's fun, it's wild, it's night-blooming orchid and splashing fountains and the fastest car you've ever been in, speeding along the coast... It's *life*.

He hardly weighs anything now. I leave him under the tree; the bums can have what he's got left. I take a pair of slippers out of my bag; it's after midnight, but I won't be running home barefoot, not like some unfortunate fairy-tale girl. Midnight's just the beginning for me.

In the distance a siren goes wailing by. Unsprung trucks speed across town, their trailers pounding as though they're beating the pavement to death. Moonlight and street light blend on the surface of the water.

I pass under the big statue of the hero on the horse, and walk jaunty and silent-footed among his many lamplit shadows. Around the bend I see a white gleam, too white and sharp to be anything but a pressed evening jacket. For a moment I think that it is Owl again. But his face, when he turns to look at me, is different.

His jacket is a little rumpled but not dirty, and his black bow tie is perfectly in place. He is smiling. I catch up to him.

"Cigarette?" he says.

"No thanks, I just had one."

He takes one from a gold-plated case, lights it and inhales slowly and contentedly. Where his lips touched it I see a dark stain.

"Hungry?"

"Not a bit."

"Wonderful night," I say.

He nods, still smiling. "Let's go dancing," he says.

We'll have a good time.