

## KW Peter - Black Nightgown

Everyone knew.

Everyone knows, he murmured to himself. His lips brushed across the white skin of her neck, the soft region between her throat and ear, when he spoke aloud, a whisper, her name. His lips brushed across the delicate strands of hair that trembled with the exhalation of his breath. He breathed in her scent that wasn't roses but just as sweet. He murmured her name, he couldn't stop himself, and she shifted in his arms but didn't wake.

They all knew, but he didn't care. Not here in this world that he wrapped his arms around and was held by at the same time. A world bound by her scent and their mingled warmth, caught by the tunnelled sheets and the white-tasselled covers. Her breasts encircled by his arm . . .

Outside, in that other world, the streetlamp's blue merged with the faint shadows of the moon. The thin light slid around the edges of the curtain, made empty shapes of her bedroom dresser and the door that led to the rest of the empty, silent house. She moved in his embrace, eyes closed, her mouth parting slightly, her breath a sigh.

"They all know."

Another's whisper. His sweat felt cold upon his naked shoulders. He turned his face away from hers and looked up at the figure standing beside the bed.

Her dead husband could see through the drawn curtain and through the walls of all the houses lining the street, the lights left on in kitchens and sleeping hallways shining through the red bricks as though through glass.

"Your mother . . . your sisters . . . even your father." The dead man looked away from the window and everything beyond, turning toward his sleeping wife. "They all know."

Of course his mother and sisters would know. He brought his face back down to hers. They had known before any of this had ever come about. He closed his eyes, lashes brushing the curve of her cheekbone. His father would never speak of what he knew. He kissed the corner of her mouth.

They all know . . .

And now he did as well. He knew; he knew something.

He held her fast in the night of their small world. Held her, and felt her dead husband watching them. Watching them in the great night's world.

The women spoke the old world's language. The mothers less than the grandmothers, and the daughters only a few words. But they all knew, and understood. The grey-haired poked their tree-root fingers through the shelled peas, the bowls held in their laps as they sat gossiping to each other or murmuring to themselves; the youngest turned their dark-eyed gaze at him as he stepped into the street to pass by their jump ropes slapping the cracked sidewalk. Whisper into each other's ears, laugh and run away, their white anklets flashing like the teeth of an ocean's waves.

He asked his father what women talked about.

"Christ in his fucking Heaven -- who knows?" Sweating through his undershirt as a cleaver snapped free the ribs of a dangling carcass, the knotted spine turned naked as a row of babies' fists. In the store's glass-fronted cabinets, the mounds of beef liver glistened like soft, wet rubies. "Ask them and get told what a fool you are." Drops of blood spattered the sawdust and the broken leather of his father's boots.

Outside the door, with the slow overhead fan trying to keep the flies away, the little girls' ropes had been left behind like shed snakeskins. He rang open the cash register and sorted out the dollar bills that the neighborhood housewives had paid him for their deliveries. His hands still smelled like raw sausages and the red water that had leaked through the wrapping paper.

Later, he took a beer from the case kept just inside the door of the meat locker, a privilege he'd earned when he'd started shaving, and sat in the alley doorway. He tossed his stained white apron across a hook on the rail that the slaughterhouse trucks backed up to, and tilted his head to drink the bottle half-empty. He could watch, undetected as an evening ghost, as the married women walked by the alley's mouth, flat summer sandals and arms shining from the tarry pavement's heat. The shy, pretty one who had married last autumn bent her head over her newborn. All their voices were like the sounds of nesting birds, too soft to tell what they were saying. He rolled the bottle between his wet hands. He knew that they were probably talking, among other things, about him and the widow.

"She oughta wax that upper lip of hers." That was what his oldest sister had said, not because the woman had a moustache, but because she was so dark and wore hollow gold bracelets on her wrists like a gypsy. She looked like their grandmother's wedding photograph, the framed sepia oval in the hallway. His other sisters had giggled behind their hands, though the widow wasn't any darker than any of them.

She hadn't been a widow then. Her husband was a Cracow dandy and still alive. That was what his mother called a man who wore a pinstripe suit with a waist nipped in like a woman's. A hat and a red silk tie that turned black around the knot, like a hummingbird's throat. It must have been winter when he'd heard his mother call the man that, because he remembered the kitchen window being covered with steam from the pots upon the stove. His father had sat at the table eating, his suspenders hanging loose from his waist, his big-knuckled fists swallowing the knife and fork. She'd glanced back at his father, her husband, then leaned across the sink to look out the part of the window she'd wiped transparent with her hand, looking out at the men talking under the streetlight, the shoulders of their thin jackets hunched up against the cold, their breath silver mingled plumes.

"A Cracow dandy," she'd said again, her voice filled with the same terrible empty longing it held when she spoke of her dead father. It must have been something she'd heard from her dead mother; she'd been born here. What did she know of the old world? Nothing but the old language, and less of that than her mother and her grandmother had known.

The last of the beer had warmed between his hands; on his tongue, it tasted sour and flat. He leaned forward, elbows against his knees, and watched the little girls run past the alley, called to set the tables for their fathers and older brothers who would be coming home from work soon. He had wondered if the widow still set a place for her dead husband. And then he had found out.

Before that, he could have asked his mother -- he would have, regardless of his father's warning -- if it was something women do. Were supposed to do, an empty plate in front of an empty chair. He would have, except that he knew his mother and all his sisters were on the other side of the blood feud that had broken out in the parish church. It was doubtful if his mother would say anything now, good or bad, about any of that tribe, the

widow included.

Something about the altar flowers; those were all women's doing, their world, so he could never be sure of the exact details. The priest had told the women to make room in the flower rotation for the newcomers, the ones who'd come to live in the parish only a few years ago, arriving with all their children and husbands and sons, bringing with them the air of the old world, the one that has been left a generation before. The newcomers' presence could be endured in silence, but the priest's order had caused grumbling among the women.

He took another sip of the beer's dregs and wondered how many languages the priest spoke. Not the languages that changed from place to place, but the other, the secret ones. The priest was like some black, slightly threadbare angel, neither man nor woman, occupying a barren holy ground between them. Perhaps he knew what women talked about, understood what they said; perhaps he had talked about the altar flowers in their own tongue.

Grumbling, then bad words in a language anyone could understand. He remembered his own mother muttering something under her breath as she'd passed by one of the newcomer women in the street -- not the yet-to-be widow, but one of her cousins -- her eyes narrowing as though the bell-like rattle of the other woman's gold bracelets made the fillings in her teeth ache. It could only get worse, and did. Especially after the toad crawled from the chalice at the altar rail.

He heard his father calling him from inside the shop. The last of the evening's customers would have come and gone by now; it would be time to close up and make their own way home.

Everything in its appointed time. The gears of this world's machinery meshed with the other's.

He would have to eat something of what his mother put on the table, or pretend to, pushing things around on the plate with his fork, knowing all the while that he wasn't fooling anyone. Just as he wouldn't be fooling them later, when the summer night was finally dark, and he would walk past his mother and father in the living room, pulling on a thin sweater as he stepped toward the front door without saying a word. As though he were going to do nothing more than sit out on the stoop, to catch a cooling breeze. At his back he would be able to feel, as he did every night, his mother looking up from the sewing basket on her lap, his father's glance over the top of the newspaper. Everybody knew -- why he didn't eat, where he was going, even when he would be back, in the cold pearl light before dawn.

He could hear his father rummaging through the cash register, scooping the coins out of the little trays, bundling up the dollar bills with a rubber band, dumping everything into the little drawstring bag that he'd carry home inside his coat. One night a week -- not this night, but another -- he'd sit at the bare kitchen table and sort out the bit that would be placed inside a simple white envelope, to be left on top of the shop's counter. The widow's husband used to come in to pick it up, with a smile and a nod and a few overly polite words that the butcher had acknowledged with a simmering anger in his eyes. Now one of the other Cracow dandies came in every week to pick up the money.

His father called his name again, louder. He drained the last weak taste of beer and pitched the empty bottle in among the waste bin's red bones. He pulled the apron down from the hook and walked inside with it in his

hand.

"You were thinking about that silly animal, weren't you? That toad." She sat on the other side of the table from him, her bare elbows on the white cloth, holding a glass of wine in her hands, rubbing the corner of her brow with it. Her face was shining, the loose curls of her tied-up hair dampened against her neck and by her ears, from the steam off the pots on the stove. "That was stupid, it spoils your appetite." The widow smiled, eyes half-lidded, as though there were some indefinable pleasure in watching him eat. "Think about things like that, a frog will grow in your belly and your eyes will bulge out. All the time." She lowered the glass and sipped from it.

He looked up from the plate, not sure -- never sure -- if she was joking or not. They knew so many things, all women did; maybe that was one of them, a true thing. How would he know? Then he caught the lifting of one corner of her mouth. "Bullshit."

"Bullshit, he says." She gazed up at the ceiling. "I fix him dinner, he picks at it like I'm trying to poison him, then he says bullshit to me." Her gaze, still smiling, settled back upon him. "What would your mother say if she heard you talking like that?"

He had to wonder. Not about what his mother would say, but about the possibility of some conspiracy between her and the widow, a dealing in confidences that ran beneath the little feuds and hushed glares on the ordinary world's surface.

"I don't know." No man did. He laid down his fork, a garlic clove and a bite of mutton -- it hadn't come from his father's shop, he knew that at least -- speared upon it. What they told each other, what all women shared amongst themselves, even the little girls with their jump ropes and knowing laughter. "I mean, I don't know what she'd say."

He looked down at the plate, at the speckled grease congealing, a scrap of bread as white as the underside of her breasts. As dark as she was, how shining black her hair and eyes . . . he'd laid his hand upon skin as pale as glass, beneath which the trembling of her veins could be seen, blue ink written on milk. He'd been rendered wordless by how that soft curve had fitted its cloudlike weight into his palm, an event foreordained by dreaming prophets.

Now he bit and chewed, laying the emptied fork back down, the motion of his jaws massaging the brain. To thoughts unbidden, still the blasphemous toad. He hadn't even been in the church that day, but he'd heard -- everyone had; they all knew -- and he could imagine the woman's cry as she'd fainted from the rail, the chalice rolling through the blood of Christ spilled upon the floor, as clearly as though he'd been in one of the pews. One of the altar boys had scooped up the toad to keep it from being trampled upon in the uproar or beaten to death with a broom-handle by the verger who saw Satan in every unusual thing. The toad was let go by the boys, with a degree of fearful reverence -- it did, after all, count as some kind of miracle -- in the tangled weeds behind the rectory. Nothing that had happened had been the toad's fault; everyone knew the ones responsible. The newcomer women had sat together, a long row of them wearing the old-fashioned black clothing in which they came to church, bits of their gold ornaments gleaming out through the stiff black lace at their wrists and throats. Through all the crying and shouting, they had passed a smile both secret and public amongst themselves. He knew that the

widow-to-be had been there with her sisters and cousins, the grandmother with gold in her mouth as well, all of them; because they had known what was going to happen. All this over the altar flowers.

"Such a little thing," she said. The widow gazed into her wineglass as though a mirror were there. "What a thing to worry about. And let it spoil your appetite."

He swallowed, the lamb sticking in his throat for a moment. He hadn't come here for dinner; he never had. He closed his eyes to see better, just what he was thinking of.

"You're so stupid." She said it with great affection, the way she might have said it to her husband when he was alive. She laid her hand on top of his beside the plate. "A toad -- what's that?"

He shook his head. That she could tell what he was thinking of, he couldn't doubt. But never exactly; always a little shifted in focus, the circle around the bull's-eye. He supposed that was another difference between men and women, one that made all the other differences bearable. Not that toad, but the other. A story that was not even whispered about, but which everybody knew somehow. That the men knew something of, enough to keep their silence, and the women, even the little girls, knew everything. Because it dealt with the business of women, even more than the altar flowers had.

Eyes closed, he felt the soft weight of her hand upon his. The widow must have leaned closer to him, across the table; he could smell her scent, both her perfume of ancient roses and the other, that would taste of salt when he kissed her brow.

"You're so pretty."

He opened his eyes. "No, I'm not."

"Don't be mad. I just meant I like to look at you. That's all."

Her eyes were so dark, he could have fallen inside them. That was a scary enough thought -- scary that he would want to -- he had to turn his face away from hers.

"Why do you think about these things?" Her scolding voice touched his ear.

"If they make you feel so strange?" Then softer: "Better you should think about me." Her fingers closed around his wrist. "Here." She had undone the buttons of her throat. She pressed his palm against the skin; he could feel her pulse echoing among the small bones of his hand.

He looked round and saw the whiteness caught beneath his fingertips. His skin was already chafed and hardened, like his father's, from the knives and icy flesh of the butcher shop.

"Nobody was hurt." She whispered to him now; he could feel the words move inside the widow's throat. "What happened had to be done. And the girl's fine now. Isn't she?"

He nodded. Everything she said was true. The war that had started with the altar flowers had come to an end, not by the parish women admitting defeat, but by their recognizing that the dark-eyed newcomers hadn't left their skills and secrets in the old world. That, in fact, what they knew was a worthy match for those who had come over generations before them. For everyone to know that was enough.

And the girl, the one who had taken the newcomers' flowers, roses dark and red, and dumped them in the battered trashcans behind the church hall's kitchen -- she was just fine now. Or as well as could be expected. She was actually some second or third cousin of his, in those ways that could only be figured out by his grandmother or one of her sisters poring, mumbling,

over a sepia photograph album, was just fine now. Or as well as could be expected. The girl had come back, tanned and loud-voiced, from a long vacation with her aunt and her uncle who ran a construction business in far-off Tempe, Arizona. The girl had only stayed around long enough to show how healthy she was now, that none of what had happened to her really mattered, that everything, her brief marriage and pregnancy and what had happened in the delivery room, that had all been something like a dream. From which she had wakened with a Reno divorce certificate and a cantaloupe webbing of stretch marks across her stomach, that just meant she couldn't wear two-piece bathing suits any more. Then the girl had gone with her barking, brittle laugh into the city, to work as a secretary in another uncle's import-export company and sleep with negro musicians. There were enough of her friends left behind who envied her, that the widow could say now that no one had been hurt and it would be true enough.

It was only the men who knew, and the older boys who knew, and those like himself who were caught between those estates, who dreamed and let their waking thoughts be troubled by such things, that were women's business and none of their own. They all knew, even though they had seen nothing of what had happened to the girl. Fool that he was, fool that both he and the widow knew him to be, as all women know all men are; he could close his eyes, like the point of his tongue unable to resist prodding an aching tooth, and see a chrome and white-tiled room, the girl's feet up in the stirrups, a hospital-green sheet over her enormous belly. And then another tongue poke, and he would see more of what he didn't want to see and couldn't keep from seeing: the doctor's sweat soaking through his mask as he shouted at the nurses and anaesthesiologist to get out, to get out of the delivery room and leave him alone here. Then the doctor had turned back to his task, lifting the sheet above the girl's spread-apart knees with one gloved hand, while the sharpest scalpel from the tray glittered in his other hand. Bringing the metal close enough to reflect the idiot round eyes peering from the small darkness, the webbed claws braced to keep it inside the wet sling of flesh it was so reluctant to leave. How did these pictures get inside their heads, if they were of things the men had never seen, never been told about? But they all knew, after a night of bad dreams they could see it in each other's eyes; he had seen it in the way his father had bent over the broom, sweeping off the sidewalk in front of the store, counting the money into the till to get ready for the morning's first customer. And silence, the silence that lay behind the words even when someone spoke, silence that had looked at and then turned away from the cruel necessities of women's business. All the men, the priest included, had been grateful that the war of the altar flowers had ended, that this truce both grudgeful and admiring had been achieved. And he, the butcher's son, had been grateful, because by that time he had already begun sleeping with the dark-eyed widow. In her kitchen, the night velvet behind the steamy windows, he sat leaning across the table toward her. She loosened another button at the front of her dress, and his hand fell of its own weight, almost without will, to cup her breast. "You're so stupid," she murmured and smiled, her own eyes half-lidded now. He knew she meant not just him, but all of them. There was one more picture inside his head, that he turned his face down toward his plate to see, as though ashamed of this weakness. But he had

to, so he could forget for a while, or long enough. Her heartbeat rocked inside his palm even louder now. His arm felt hollow into his chest, where his own pulse caught in time with hers.

Inside his head, in that other night, the doctor still wore his surgical scrubs from the delivery room. As he walked across the field behind the hospital's parking lot, the high grass silvered by the moon. Carrying something wadded up inside the green sheet, something that leaked through red upon his bare hands. Until the doctor flung open the sheet from where he stood upon the high bank of a creek, and heard a second later the pieces drop into the water. He threw in the red-edged scalpel as well, and it disappeared among the soft weeds like the bright flash of a minnow. In that picture, the doctor looked over his shoulder at the hospital's lights, face hardened against what he'd come to know about the business of women. The doctor and the priest were brothers apart from other men, and the same as all men. They all knew, but could not speak of these things. He felt the widow kiss him on the side of his face. He looked up and saw her, and nothing else. Nothing at all.

She wore a black nightgown to bed, or what would have been black if her skin hadn't shone so luminous through it. To him it looked like smoke in her bedroom's darkness, smoke across a city of a thousand doors, the shadow across the crypt deep in the white stone where Our Redeemer was both born and buried.

The black nightgown felt like smoke as well, if smoke could have been gathered into his hands. He lay with her in his arms, her eyes closed now, the sheets moulded with sweat to his ribs.

"She likes it very much that way." Her husband's awkward English came from above them, from the side of the bed. "To be held, and held. just so."

He turned his head and looked up at the dead man. The Cracow dandy. Half of the man's face was gone, from the first bullet that had struck him in the eye, then the rest that his murderer had poured like water from an outstretched hand, feet spread to either side of the man's shoulders upon the pavement. Not murder really, but a business disagreement between the Cracow dandy and his dark-eyed brothers; it was the business of men to know the difference. Just as it had been the business of the butcher, every other Friday, to ring NO SALE on the cash register and count again the thin sheaf of fives and tens in the plain white envelope that he set beside the Saint Vincent de Paul charity jar. So that the Cracow dandy, when he'd been alive, or one of his elegantly tailored associates, could come in, smile and talk to the butcher, and buy nothing and leave, the envelope somehow magically transported into the dandy's coat pocket without his ever having shown his soft, manicured hands. Then nodding to the butcher's son with the pushbroom and smiling, all of them knowing that this was how the business of men was done. So much so, knowledge passed from one generation to the next, from the old world to this, that he had known what to do without being told, to wait upon the rest of the day's customers, to wrap chops and stew bones, and make change and finally lock the shop up, turning the sign in the door from OPEN to CLOSED, all while his father sat on the alley stoop and knocked back thimbles of schnapps with a heavy, brooding scowl on his face.

"I know," he told the dead man. "I know what to do next. You don't have to tell me."

"You know . . ."

But that wasn't the dead man who spoke, who whispered, it was the widow with the dark eyes and the black nightgown, the stuff of smoke and silk, pushed above her hips. His hand passed from there to the curve of her thigh, and it felt like laying his palm upon his mother's stove, if anything in the world could be both that soft and yet as hot as heated iron. Hot enough to burn the tongue in his mouth until he was as mute as dead men should be.

"Like this . . ."

He knew that her dead husband stood by the bed, an angel in an elegant suit. A Cracow dandy, a rose with splinters of bone for white thorns where his right eye and cheekbone had been. He felt the dead man's fingers curve around his hand, the way his father's had when he had first been shown how to bring the cleaver between the compliant ribs. Now he let the dead man cup his palm around the widow's breast.

I'm not such a fool, he thought. I know all this. I was born knowing.

But he let the dead man show him anyway. Because that was what she wanted.

He knew that as well.

"Kiss her." The dead man whispered in his ear. "While you hold her. Press tight and don't be afraid. Be a man . . ."

I'm not afraid. He hadn't been afraid the first time he had been in her bed -- their bed -- and he had looked over his shoulder and seen her dead husband with the ruined face. How could anyone lying in bed with a woman ever be afraid? And with her clad only in a nightgown of black smoke and silk . . .

That was what women didn't know. For all their mysteries and secrets, for even the youngest girls' knowing smiles -- they didn't know that when men trembled in this place, in the grave of desire, it was not from fear.

He opened his eyes and looked down. Looked down and saw what the dead man above him saw. He saw her with her eyes closed, lips slightly parted, her naked arms reaching . . .

For her husband.

His face burning with shame, he looked over his shoulder to the one who the dark-eyed widow loved, who she would always love.

"Don't feel bad." The Cracow dandy's voice was the kindness of one man to another. "It's not that she doesn't care for you. She might even have loved you, or someone like you, if she hadn't loved me first."

"I know. I know that," he said. "It doesn't matter."

Here . . .

He no longer knew whose voice it was, that told him what to do. It could have been his own.

Like this . . .

Or hers. He watched his hand, or that of her dead husband, stroke her dark hair upon the pillow. She turned her face toward that touch.

And smiled.

"You see?" said the dead man. "Just like that. just like that. Just like that."

He closed his own eyes. And kissed her. The tear between his lashes and her cheek burned like fire, if fire were salt.

As he knew would happen -- as none of them told him, but he knew anyway -- a year passed, from the time a sealed coffin was lain in earth, to the time when he knocked upon her door, his hands smelling of blood from his father's shop, no matter how much he scrubbed them with soap and vinegar.



A year passed from the Cracow dandy's death, he knew it had, but he still came and knocked at her door.

The dark-eyed widow opened the door just wide enough that he could see the others inside, the bottles of wine upon the table, and hear their bright laughter. She looked out upon him, standing there in the darkness that came so early in the winter. She smiled with enough sadness to break his heart, then shook her head and silently closed the door. He could still hear the laughter and singing on the other side.

He turned away and saw the cardboard box at the curb, the box of her old clothes, for the trash collectors to pick up and carry away. All the black dresses that she had worn for the last year. The black with which she had mourned her dead husband. A year had passed and she didn't need them anymore.

He knelt down and pushed his hands through the contents of the box. Until he found, at the bottom, something of silk and smoke. He drew it out and held it against his face, breathing in the scent that was part her and part the perfume of ancient roses that she had used.

He knew. He had always known. A year would pass, and she would forget about both of them, the butcher's son and the Cracow dandy. She was still young, and a year had passed.

He heard steps running on the sidewalk. They halted, and he looked up and saw one of the youngest girls watching him without smiling, a coil of jump rope in her hand. It got dark so early, this time of year.

The little girl ran past him, toward her home and supper. He let the nightgown slip from his hands, drifting across his knee and a corner of the box like smoke, if smoke could fall.