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THE SINGING MARINE

It's so hot in August in that part of Virginia that dogs die standing up and even insects stick to the asphalt. Flies buzz in place. Embedded, an overturned stag beetle waves its legs helplessly. The singing Marine has to move fast to keep his boondockers from sinking in and gluing him to the spot.

He may be singing to take his mind off what's just happened -- the tragedy, or is it disgrace that probably marks the end of his life in the service. The accident -- his platoon. How many men has he lost, and how can a man facing court martial ever hope to love the general's daughter?

Putting one boot in front of the other, he goes along as if understanding is a place you can get to on foot, and as he goes, the song just keeps unfurling. "My mother m-m-m . . ."

If anybody asked what he was singing he would look up, surprised; who, me?

But he sings, ". . . m-m-m-m-murdered me . . ."

The road gets stickier. Heat mirages shimmer in the middle distance and rise up in front of him, thick and troublesome as cream of nothing soup.

Fuddled by the dense air, the Marine bows his head against the heat and goes into the dim rural drugstore. He is not aware he's being followed.

"What's that you're singing?"

The Marine blinks. "Say what?"

It is a woman's voice. "Mister, the song."

Exploding afterimages of sunlight stud the dimness, so he does not immediately see the speaker. "Ma'am?"

The voice blurs suggestively. "Sit down, Lieutenant."

He blunders against a large shape -- leatherette booth, he thinks. He can still leave. "Ma'am, you don't want me to sit with you."

The woman's hand closes on his arm and pulls him down. "You don't know what I want until I tell you."

"You haven't told me your name."

It becomes clear she isn't going to. He hears the sound she makes inside her clothes as she crosses her legs; he can't stop blinking. He thinks he can smell the warm air rising from the hollow at her throat.

What he says next, he says because he can't help himself. The old threnody always bubbles up at times like this, when he thinks he's close -to what? He

can't say. He just begins. "I was born of blood and reborn in violence. If you can't handle either, you don't want me sitting with you."

She leans across the table. "You haven't told me what you were singing."

"It's an old thing. I used to think it was sad, but now . . ." He's hurtled into

a complicated thought that he can't finish. There's no way to tell her he has bigger problems now. Instead he tells the old story: born late to a childless couple, mother dead in childbirth, wicked stepmother Gerda and the inevitable murder, if it was a murder. His father was away; he, was never able to get the truth from his frantic half sister: "You were sitting by the door and your head

came off; what can I tell you, your head came off." They buried him under the linden tree, Marline and the stepmother, but he rose up, or something did, leached of memory and stark blind crazy with love; he thinks that was him flying

overhead and singing, singing:

"My mother murdered me;

"My father grieved for me;

"My sister, little Marline,

"Wept under the linden tree . . ."

The woman snaps, "I thought it was an almond tree."

"All depends where you're coming from," he says, blinking until her outlines emerge from the dimness -- wedge-shaped face as beautifully defined as a cat's muzzle, long hair falling over long white arms and that neatly composed face veiling her intentions; he thinks she may be beautiful -- too early to tell. "Whatever it is, I can't seem to get rid of the song."

"You're still singing?"

He says in some bewilderment, "It sings me."

Even in the shadows the sudden, attentive tilt of her head is apparent. "And what do you think it means?"

But he slaps both hands flat on the table. "Enough. The stepmother got crushed in a rockfall. I came back. When being home got too hard, I joined up. That's all you need to know."

"Yes," she says, perhaps too quickly. "It is."

"So if you don't mind . . ."

"You haven't ordered."

There is nothing on the menu that he wants. This isn't a bar, where you can order something deep enough to disappear into; it's an old-fashioned pharmacy with a soda fountain and this is high noon, not the dead of night that lets you

go home with the lovely woman who found you. When he goes outside, it will still

be hot and bright. "It's not my kind of place."

As he stands she rises with him; they could be executing the first movement in an elegant pas de deux. "It's not mine either," she says, drawing her long hands down his arms. "Let me take you someplace where it's cool."

Emerging from the air-conditioned drugstore, he is staggered by the heat. When he looks for the woman, she is several paces ahead. "Where are we going?"

Her tone is suggestive; she does not look back, but the words reach him. "Someplace you already know."

The Marine will remember the afternoon as a bizarre, agonizing progress on foot, her striding ahead with those black gauze skirts flying and him struggling along behind, heading for the next town. No cars pass them but he understands that she would not accept a ride. In the outskirts of the big town or small city, she stops at a marked bench just as the bus comes along. DEEP CAVERNS, the marker says. He is about to tell her he's never heard of the place when she turns on the step and pulls him on board.

So they ride out to the caverns side by side on the cracked leatherette back seat with engine fumes boiling up between their knees while the woman thinks whatever she is thinking and the singing Marine finds that even the relentless monotony of the song cannot crowd out the mishap that separated him from his platoon last night and put him on this road. He is grieving for them. "What?"

"I said, when you get there, I want you to go inside for me."

The thick fumes make his eyes water. "Ma'am?"

"I can't," she says. "You have to. Understand, you won't be sorry. In the end, I'll make you very happy."

"You . . . want me to go into the caverns?"

"It's cool," she says. "Believe me, you won't be sorry."

"You want me to go in and get . . ."

"The tinderbox. It's an old-fashioned fire-starter."

"What would you want a thing like that for?"

Her eyes glow. Something behind them begins to smoulder. "Just do what I say. Then you'll see. Get it and I'll start your fires."

"I was on my way back to the base," he says.

Her smile is touched with malicious humor. "What would you want to do a thing like that for?"

He chooses not to catch her tone. Instead he starts telling; like the song he sings, it's something he has to do because he needs to hear it. "I have to report. I have to let them know it wasn't my fault. I have to forestall the court martial. It was my platoon. I. God, the sergeant!" He stops and starts again. "We were on maneuvers near Ocracoke. He marched them into the marsh." He does not tell her that the marsh gave way underneath them and half his men are

still out there somewhere, either mired to the knees or drowned in mud and confusion; he does not tell her that in another few hours he will be AWOL. "I have to report. I do."

Without even looking at him, she divines the rest. She knows what lies at his center. She is brusque, almost matter-of-fact. "Your platoon's okay. They found everyone. It's in all the papers."

His heart leaps up. "You're sure?"

How cleverly she plays him. "TV this morning. Interviews."

"But I'm not there."

"Oh, you," she says. "They think you deserted."

Maybe I have. It's too much to contemplate. "I have to go back and explain it."

"Do this and you won't have to go back at all. You'll be rich enough to buy your way out of anything."

But when Taps sounds tonight the Marine will go back, slouching over the causeway like the returning prodigal in his muddy fatigues and the boondockers that won't stop squelching water. When he does, he will be richer. He knows that

when a beautiful woman you don't know asks you to do her a favor, you do what she asks soon enough, but you never, ever let her know what you're thinking.

Right now he says, "I'll think about it."

"No time for that. We're getting off."

They are in the woods for more than an hour, during which the lieutenant's boots

get heavier in a geometric progression toward eternity. The heat is intolerable.

Gnats crawl into his ears and clog his nostrils; mosquitos feed on the exposed back of his neck, sliding down the sweaty surface to feed on his most vulnerable

parts. By the time the woman reaches the cave mouth and gestures, he's ready to

plunge in without question: anything to escape the humidity that is pressing down on him and steaming in his throat and in the space between his regulation cap and his skull.

She turns as if she's already explained this: "You understand why I can't go in there."

He shakes his head. The shadowed opening at her back lures him; he wants to throw himself down on the worn stone floor and sleep until December.

"The dogs."

He blinks sweat out of his eyes, saying politely, "Ma'am?"

She says impatiently, "I can't go in because of the dogs."

"Dogs." Does he hear anything? Smell anything different? The place is still and if there's anything living inside, there is no hint of it. "Are you sure there are dogs in there?"

She turns that neatly feline face at an angle that makes it impossible for him to read her intentions. "Don't worry. There are only three of them. They have big eyes." When she looks up again her eyes gleam. "And they have what you want. Watch out for the last one, though," she adds. "He can make you or break you."

"It will be dark."

She shakes her head. "It's lighted. They were going to turn this into Luray Caverns until they found out the air was toxic."

"Toxic!"

"It won't bother you," she says with such sublime assurance that he believes her. "And what you find will solve all your problems." She lays out the details.

This is how the singing Marine finds himself descending into Deep Caverns while his companion reclines like a figure carved in the rock at its mouth and waits for him to come back with the tinderbox. "My mother m-m-m . . ." Not his mother. Gerda. For the first time since he came back to himself after the business with the linden tree, the song sounds right. The faces of his platoon recede and he is alone, singing in the cavern.

It is as she told him. At the widest point he finds three little niches opening off the tunnel like side chapels in a subterranean place of worship, but instead of religious statuary or mummified corpses they contain bits of blackness that stalk back and forth inside like furred furies; when the animals see the Marine they lunge for him and are hurled back into their niches as if by invisible barriers. Glowering, they mount their mahogany chests like reluctant plaster saints returning to their pedestals.

He does not like the looks of the first animal. Its eyes are big enough but when he says, "Nice doggy," it stirs in a tremendous effort to please him, and scratches up a storm of pennies that lands at his feet like so much gravel. Pick up that junk and I won't have any room in my suit for the real thing. Thus he throws out his first set of instructions. "Nothing doing," he says, and goes on to the next. The eyes are even huger, but in its attempt to win his attention the next animal scratches up a shower of dollar bills, shredded by sharp toenails and worthless as confetti.

The third dog does nothing. Sitting on its chest of treasure it regards him with eyes bigger and more brilliant than anybody's attempts to describe them. The effect is of lemon neon.

It is like looking into the eye of the beholder.

Without knowing what he means, the Marine says, "Then you know."

Although the dog makes no sound, the singing Marine takes its meaning:
Everything.

Flowing like velvet, the creature jumps off the chest, fixing him with its intense yellow glare. Although the dog is kept in the little cavern by a shield he can't see, the singing Marine climbs up on the ledge and enters easily. Now that they are in the same space he knows that if it wants to, the animal can destroy him.

"I didn't want to come back from the dead, you know." He thinks about his platoon. "You know being dead is easier."

The silence is profound. The Marine stands with his arms at his sides, waiting. There is a stir as if of air masses colliding. Huge and silent, the dog surges into the space between them. Still he does not move. He does not move even when the massive brute pads the last two steps and presses its bearlike head against him. Startled by the warmth, the weight, the singing Marine feels everything bad rush out of him: the violent death and burial, the strange reincarnation that finds him both victim and murderer, song and singer, still in the thrall of the linden tree and the spirits that surround it. The great dog's jaws are wide; its mouth is a fiery chasm, but he doesn't shrink from it.

When you have been dead and buried, many things worry you, but nothing frightens you.

"Stay," he says, and without caring whether it attacks him, he opens the chest. On top he finds the object in question -- fire-starter, she explained, an antique tinderbox, looking crude and insufficient in its bed of thousand dollar bills. Something glitters -- diamonds scattered among the bills as if by some supremely casual hand. He picks up the tinderbox.

"This is what she wants," he says to the dog. The neon eyes won't let him lie; he couldn't. "I'm supposed to take the rest, but it's only money."

The lemon eyes glimmer like paired moons.

"Money isn't everything." The song is back; he can feel the leaves of the linden tree stirring overhead and one more time replays out the perpetual round of death and survival. He is afraid of repeating it into eternity. He slams the lid and looks at the dog. "Money isn't anything." He looks up, puzzled: the box. "But neither is fire."

There is a stir; blacker than shadow, even blacker because of the neon eyes,

the creature nudges him again. Its great plumed tail is wagging.

"Good boy." He tries to pat its head; the dense fur is so deep that his hand won't stop sinking into it. "You keep it. But this." Studying the tinderbox, he turns it over in his hand. "I wonder what she wants with it."

There is seismic thunder -- a growl so profound that he forgets the eyes. Then the animal becomes a fury of deep fur and warm flesh and compressed muscles. Planting its head in his chest, it pushes the singing Marine to the edge of the little niche and to his astonishment, nudges him so he falls back into the tunnel. Its growl makes the lights flicker. Without knowing how he knows to do this, the Marine slips the tinderbox deep into his fatigues, storing it in a spot nobody can reach without his express permission. Then he looks up at the great moon eyes. Unlike most animals, this one meets his stare; he feels himself disappearing into the glow. Trapped though it is behind invisible bars, the brute makes a low purr, almost like a tiger's. The tail moves like a flight of banners. He doesn't know what it's trying to tell him. Then he does; it is amazing.

Therefore when the Marine comes up from underground and the beautiful woman slips both arms around his neck and thanks him, he is wary. When he realizes she's patting the many pockets of his fatigues, he is even more wary, but he's not surprised when she says, "You didn't take any money."

He shakes his head.

"But you got the box."

"I did," he says.

"Where is it?"

He only shakes his head.

"I see." She is already fumbling in the depths of her black gauze skirt; she pulls something out of her pocket. Because they are beyond apologies or explanations she says, "Gerda didn't die in a rockfall, you killed her," and as she brings out the knife and raises it high he sees that she looks enough like the dead murderess to be her sister.

He has no choice but to kill her. Marines know how to do this without weapons. Inside, not far from the cave's mouth, there's a chasm so deep that when he pushes her in -- sexy, but vindictive, Gerda's sister, he listens and listens and never hears her hit bottom. The singing Marine, who hears the same old song unfurling, but louder. "That should be the end of it," he says, but it isn't. He takes the box and without much minding that he's left behind the treasure in the cavern, he does what he should have done in the first place. He goes back to the base.

It is night by the time he gets there, and instead of marching through the main

gate like a good officer, he turns off the road and runs along the fence. When you've been dead and buried and come back, you are beyond going out looking for trouble. Instead, you go to earth and wait for it to find you.

He snakes under the cyclone fence at the spot his platoon found during exercises early in training. He runs like a fox through the gullies and comes to earth in the deep gulch behind the senior officers' quarters, where he lies down too tired for thought and sobs until sleep comes up from behind and takes him. One by one the houses at the top of the cliff go dark; from down here they all look alike and it will be noon before the singing Marine realizes that the general's daughter must be only a few houses away, in the back bedroom of the biggest house at the end of Officers' Row. She lies north to south in her bed while face down, the singing Marine lies north to south in the rocks and wet earth near the bottom of the gully. Although she doesn't know he exists, their breathing is synchronized. Breath for breath, she matches him.

At reveille he hears the base waking up: the military motor humming, gears meshing so smoothly that he might never be missed here, and for the first time since they buried him under the linden tree, he is profoundly lonely.

Last night he had imagined it was only a matter of hours until the MPs found him, thus relieving him of any decisions. This morning he understands this place is secure; if he wants to, he can live here forever. The idea has a certain appeal to him. When you have been dead and buried you lose your tolerance for changes.

He has not eaten. Crouched in the gulch with his knees up, the singing Marine considers his options. If he sneaks off the base his life as he knows it is over. If he lets them catch him, his life as he knows it is over. But, God, he is hungry. Still he is an officer, and he is not going to be shot while scavenging. Instead he sits with his head between his knees waiting until he gets tired of waiting. Then he pulls out the tinderbox and with a sense of inevitability, opens it.

There is a little flint stick and a surface to strike it on. He does this once. Twice. Three times, and as he strikes it the third time the earth rattles. "It's too soon!" he cries, loud enough that the general's daughter, hanging her stonewashed jeans on the back rail of her father's quarters several houses away, will lift her head. "You called?" But by that time the singing Marine has slammed the box and whatever has been rumbling toward him just beneath the surface of the earth shudders, receding.

Distressed and gnawed by hunger but still humming, m-m-m-m, he rolls over and presses himself into the ground. The sensation is not unfamiliar. In the astounding concentration peculiar to certain mystics, he withdraws to sing the song and wait for night to come again. Rousing once, he sees the sun is low and he sets his inner alarm clock for midnight. Then, schooled in resignation, he lies still, waiting.

When it's safe he sits up and strikes the tinderbox three times. This time when sparks fly, he will leave it open. Instead of fire, it brings dense, living blackness out of blackness, huge and silent, warm. The lemon neon eyes regard him.

"I knew you'd come," he says. The dog drops something in his lap and rests its great head on his lap. "And I knew you'd bring food. Money isn't anything, but you can die of hunger."

Closer than close, the dog lies next to him while he eats. It is like sitting with a furnace. When he's done eating he leans into the thick, dense fur and without having to tell it anything, he makes the dog know everything. After a moment it gets up and shakes itself until electricity flies in the darkness. Then it wheels, action following intention so fluidly that they are as one, and the gorgeous brute seems to melt into nothing.

Alone, the singing Marine stares into his empty hands and considers his options. His life as he knows it is over here. It's too late for him to explain himself; only a goddess could do it.

A goddess. It's as if the dog has heard. In seconds it's back, coming over the edge of the little cliff and descending, as silent as it is enormous. Its shape has changed -- it seems bulkier, and when the Marine gets to his feet to welcome it he sees this is because there is something on its back: the impossible superimposed on the unlikely. Here is the general's daughter, pale in the shift she slept in, lying in the dog's deep fur and sleeping as heavily as if she'd never been separated from the bed she lay down on.

He tells himself he only needs her to hear him out.

He tells himself he's only doing this because he loves her.

He tells himself this is a long dream and in dreams people love and become as one without actually touching.

Murmuring, she stirs in her sleep. This is the real general's real daughter. This is now and in these days you don't take women unless they invite you.

He says, "I love her, but not like this."

There is that ramble, as of thunder. Growling, the dog cocks its head and before the Marine can put out his hand to stay it or to touch the dangling satiny arm of the beautiful sleeper, it turns and vanishes.

For the rest of the night and the next long day, the singing Marine considers. There is the song, that will not stop singing. There is the general's daughter, so close that he can climb out of the gulch if he wants to and try to find her. There is the disgrace that has ended his military career and brought him to all

this. Is he victim or lover or deserter? He does not know. All he knows is that
as soon as it gets dark he will summon the dog again.

And the dog will bring the general's daughter. Tonight she is in a faded
T-shirt
the color of the ocean and she looks like Undine, sleeping deep under water.
His
heart staggers. If he lays his head against her will she know everything?

This time he keeps her until morning. And this time, although the singing
Marine
doesn't know it, her father the general will note that his daughter is
missing,
and when he summons the dog again tomorrow night and the dog brings the
general's daughter, the slashed pockets of the shirt she has worn to bed will
begin to dribble sequins, laying a glittering trail to the spot where he has
hidden her.

If MPs look and look and can't find the place, at least at first, he will have
the dog to thank. In a brilliant flash of comprehension the animal will strip
the shirt with its teeth before it descends into the gully, tossing sequins in
a
dozen different directions. Not its fault that a few spangled bits cling to
its
fur as it sets its great haunches and slides to the spot where the Marine is
hiding. Here they stay, brute and master and beautiful sleeping girl, who
stirs
and threatens to wake as the Marine shakes off whatever has been holding him
back and too near dawn for anything to be realized, he moves to kiss her.

He can't know whether it's the dog or something inside himself asking: Why
don't
you just take what you want?

When you have been dead and buried you operate in a different context.

Still he tells himself she knows what she's doing; he tells himself her eyes
are
really open. Awake or not, she raises her arms and they fall into a long
embrace
made sweeter by the inevitability of interruption.

Almost at once the sun comes up and woman and dog, burden and bearer, recede
so
quickly that they might as well have vanished, leaving the singing Marine
cooling in the dirt with his heart so torn by the pressure of guilt and sorrow
and the excruciating pain of these near misses that he sings, too loud:

"My mother murdered me.

"My father grieved for me.

"My sister, little Marline . . ."

Yes he probably wants them to find him.

Which they do in the middle of the bright afternoon, sturdy, clean-shaven
jarheads, earnest and spiffy in full uniform in spite of the heat, with
polished

boots and puttees and the inevitable white armbands, standing over him, and at attention. The hell of it is that as they march him out in the smelly fatigues and the squelching boondockers they will call him Sir and they will treat him with the courtesy appropriate to a ranking officer even though he no longer deserves it.

When night falls in the maximum security wing of the brig, the commanding general comes to see him. He posts his aides outside and comes in alone. It is a surprise to both of them. He looks surprisingly like his daughter, but much tougher. They will not exchange words, exactly. Instead the general will ask him:

"Why?"

and the singing Marine will not be able to answer.

Then the general will ask him, "How?"

and once again, he will not be able to answer. What comes out of him now is "m-m-m-m" because his heart is breaking and the song he sings will not stop singing itself. Even lost out of his mind in love, he is going to hear it. He will go to his grave hearing it.

Then he thinks perhaps when he is in the grave, he won't have to hear it anymore.

"You know what I can have done to you," the general says.

The singing Marine does know. He also knows without needing to be told that tradition says he can end all this and make it a happy ending. When he left behind the money in DEEP CAVERNS and took the tinderbox, he came out with the real treasure. If he strikes it twice and leaves it open, he will have the first two dogs here to do his bidding. If he strikes it three times and leaves it open, the finest animal, his champion, his first real friend will surge into the room and together they can make anything happen.

But dogs have teeth and they will use them. No matter how fine they are, or how brilliant, necessity makes them savage, and like it or not the singing Marine is never far from the grave under the linden tree; he can see its dirt under his fingernails and smell the earth all these decades later.

Tradition tells him if the dogs kill everybody in charge the personnel on the base will beg him to become the general. He'll go to live in the general's quarters and when he goes into the girl's bedroom this time she'll be awake, and he will have her, but he is sad now, sobered by so many deaths and other losses that when he looks into himself, he discovers that he doesn't want to be that person. Crazy, but so was taking the girl and then not using her a different kind of crazy.

Perhaps because he is an officer, the MPs spared him the strip search, which means that he can feel the corner of the tinderbox digging into the soft flesh of his flank. All he has to do is take it out. But he can also hear himself.

"M-m-m-m," and, "m-m-m-murdered me . . ."

And he understands that only when he is in the grave again will the song stop singing. "Sir," he says in a soft voice, "if I tried to attack you now, would you have to shoot me?"

Astounded, the general looks up just as he launches himself, and because Marines

know how to kill in self defense the general does exactly what is expected, but

because Marines know how to kill without weapons he does it completely differently. It is so swift that the lieutenant has no time for last words or even regrets; he slips away into what he discovers with such gratitude that it obscures all love, all loss, all grief and the thought of anyone who might mourn

him, is silence. The song of love and death and rebirth and violence that he has

heard all his life since the linden tree is ending. Ends. Has ended.