



A SHORT STORY

The Darkness We Must Face

A C TURNER

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THE DARKNESS WE MUST FACE

BY

AC TURNER

It was near dark by the time I hoisted Boomer into the pickup and we got on the road. Earlier in the day the old hound got into an argument with a porcupine and lost. Took the vet close to five hours to get the quills out. Boomer wasn't happy about it, but at least he was still kicking. The vet even put a big plastic cone over his head so he wouldn't go worrying his wounds. Respect owing to Boomer's age and years of company, I didn't even let out a snicker.

When we rolled the final dusty mile down to the farmhouse, I was a might surprised to see all the flashing lights. There was so much red and blue that it looked like the Santa Claus parade had made a pitstop at my front door.

Sheriff Perkins was there with his three new deputies. All fresh out of police college, eager to make a name for themselves. They leaned on their cars, lights flashing, trying to look important.

Perkins sidled over as soon as I let Boomer out of the truck. He tried to give the dog a pat, but Boomer needed to piss so bad he brushed past him.

"Bad news," Perkins said. "Martha didn't make it to the Hatfields' bridge game."

I blinked at him. His words hung in the air for a while. In our 60 years, Martha's never been late for anything. Way her mother told it, she was even early for her own birth. So that lateness got people to worrying. Perkins said lots of coyotes were around this season, and they were getting too friendly with the local livestock. Maybe they got a little too friendly with Martha?

He and the deputies had a search party already on the go, so I figured I'd look around the farmhouse to see what I could see before joining them.

My dinner was set out on the table. Roast beef, baby potatoes and some summer squash. I stuck a finger in the dark brown gravy sitting in its cup. It already had that thick film on the top, like it had been cooling for an hour or so.

Licking the gravy off my finger, I went out on the front porch and looked to the west. The Hatfields' farm was only a mile away. With a bit of the gout, Martha could still make the walk in under an hour. Even if she got all turned around, she couldn't have been more than four -- maybe five -- miles from home.

Perkins had people heading off in every direction a compass could point. Flashlights dotted the fields around the house as far as my tired eyes could see. Good people in this town. Shirt off your back. They know I'd do the same for them and their kin.

Well, the sun came up and went down again with no sign of Martha. Coffee brewed. People searched. The ladies' auxiliary heated up casseroles to feed the masses. And I worried something awful. Where could the old gal be?

Perkins tried to send me off to bed early that night. Thought I was too old to be in the woods for that long. I said hogwash -- I'm only 75. If Barbara Hillary could reach the North Pole and John Glenn could go back into space at my age, then I could keep awake a few more hours and look for my wife.

By the fifth day of the search, with no sight or sign of Martha, things started to peter out. I knew the end was near when the three new deputies stopped showing up in the mornings. My neighbors had a little more grit, but even they were losing their steam.

On day six, even the locals started giving me the side eye. Started talking in low voices of how Martha coulda run off with a traveling salesman. Or I that I fell off the wagon again, we got in a fight, and I buried her in the back 40.

Well I knew that neither of those was true and just kept on keeping on.

At the end of day seven, Perkins took me aside and let me know the deal. He was calling off the search. After a week of beating the bushes, looking in wells and tipping over every outhouse in the county, there was no sign of Martha. Maybe, he suggested, she doesn't want to be found.

That's codswallop. Martha an' me have been tight since we met at 15. Two peas in a pod. Bananas from the same bunch. In 60 years she's never give up on me and I sure as hell would never give up on her. Perkins gave his condolences, packed up his patrol car and drove off, kicking up twin trails of dust.

I spat on the ground, then looked over at Boomer. “It’s just you and me now, partner,” I said. He woofed and I smiled. He still looked silly in that plastic cone.

After some leftover casserole for supper, I felt kinda tired, so I made my way upstairs to bed. The four-poster seemed too big and too quiet without Martha snoring beside me, so I propped myself up on a couple of pillows and broke out the family photo album. Looking at the pictures just made things hurt worse.

The thought of where she could be or what had happened to her.

I held back the tears, though. Cryin’ at 75 didn’t seem dignified. Besides, it wasn’t time to mourn yet. There was still a lot of looking left to do.

After a while, I put the album down on the side table, turned out the light, and rolled over. Just as I started to drift, I heard it.

A noise.

I waited a second.

Then I heard it again.

A scratching...

...like nails on wood.

I sat up slowly, turning my head to get a better listen. I looked down and there was Boomer, locked up tight, cone pointing toward the closet. I shook some cobwebs out of my head and told him to stop scratching and go back to sleep. He just gave me a low moan and stayed steady. I squinted my eyes and thought out loud. “These old houses make noise all the time. Settling on the foundation. Wind in the attic. Bats in the belfry.” Then, leaving Boomer to his guard, I rolled over, let out a fart, and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, after some eggs and coffee, Boomer and I set out west toward the Hatfields’. Boomer was tired but ready to get outdoors and continue the search, but it was damn near impossible to track anything after the search parties had spread their wings across the fields. Too many footprints. Too many box lunch wrappers. Too many Styrofoam coffee cups. Too many signs to track.

Kinda made me wish I had just done it all myself, Perkins be damned. I could track a deer a half mile in the woods by scent alone. I probably could’a found Martha in an hour. Two at most. I’d played Perkins’ game for a week. Now it was time to do things my way.

Now Boomer and me had spent a lot of time in these woods. Hunting. Fishing. Working the land. We knew it well.

Once we got past the old creek, I spied one of my tree stands. It’s where I’d sit for hours, waiting for a ten-pointer to wander across my salt lick, my apple pile and my crosshairs.

Sometimes, near end of season, during the rut, I'd even set out a faded old plastic doe under my stand. Some dumb buck would spot that doe and think he was gonna get lucky.

He'd strut by, rack held high, givin' her the old stink eye. Then he'd scratch and paw the ground. When all his peacocking failed to work, he'd just try and mount her.

Then I'd shoot him in the head...

...poor stupid bastard.

The sun started setting in the west and it looked like the search would take more than an hour after all. So Boomer and I turned our backs to it and made our way over the creek and through the fields, back the way we came.

At home, I left my muddy boots on the porch and slipped on my house shoes. Then it was more leftovers for me and some kibble and vet medicine for Boomer. His coat was looking better a week after the porcupine incident, and the fresh air and sunshine seemed to be doing him some good. That cone though... Poor bugger.

After supper, old Boomer and I were about to head up to an early bed when I stopped in the main room. I looked over at the full liquor cabinet. I'm not sure why I still kept it stocked. It had been shut up for years, as I once had some trouble that took twelve steps to cure.

I shook my head and headed upstairs. Too many days gone by in the woods with too little sleep at night. I could feel it. The weight was dropping off me. Not that I had much to lose. But now when I brushed my teeth, I could see my ribs in the mirror. I thought about taking a sleeping pill but decided against it. I didn't like the taste they left in my mouth. Besides, there would be plenty of time to sleep when Martha was home.

Around two in the morning, I heard it again.

That scratching.

Boomer let out a yip.

Maybe I should have taken that darn sleeping pill after all. I turned on the side light and looked for the offending hound. He was up, cone pointed at the closet door.

Then he let out a low growl. The last time I heard him growl like that was when a bobcat nearly snuck up on us when we was haying the north field.

I shucked off the covers and walked over to him. Gave him a pat.

He bristled.

He just stared at the closet door.

I stopped and looked down at him, then looked at the closet door. I could hear something. Yep, it was that scratching again. But it wasn't Boomer. He was rock steady. The sound was coming from the closet. Tired and frustrated, I strode across the room and pulled open the door.

Nothing.

I turned in triumph, eager to prove that I was smarter than a dog, when I saw them.

Words...

...scratched across the back of the closet door.

There were words.

They read:

Help me.

The hair raised on the back of my neck and I stepped back as if Boomer's porcupine was underfoot. Boomer and I stared at them words scratched into the closet door.

Help me.

Now, I know every nook and cranny of this farmhouse. Built it with my own hands more than fifty years ago. I chopped down the trees, milled every board and put in every window. I put in that very closet door myself, and those words were never there before.

At least never before Martha disappeared.

An hour must have passed before Boomer and I dared turn our heads to each other. I looked down at him and he looked up at me. After a while, I crawled back into bed and pulled the covers over my head. I tell you, the sun could not have come up quick enough that morning.

Exhausted, I drank my second cup of coffee and wondered what to do. Boomer seemed relaxed after his kibble. Or it could have just been his meds. I was not relaxed. Not relaxed at all. I wasn't sure what to do or who to tell. Who would believe me? I could have picked up the phone and called Perkins, but he would blab and people would start thinking I was senile and try to tuck me away in a padded room or something.

The day passed, but no answer came to me. So that night I loaded up my 12 with double-ought buck and took Boomer's cone off. He was mighty happy about that. He rolled around on his back for a few minutes making happy sounds. Then I pulled up a chair and old Boomer and me sat and waited.

Right around two in the morning, Boomer let out a low growl.

Then the scratching in the closet started again.

I sucked in a hot breath and let it out. Then I stood up, careful not to let the chair creak too much, and slowly inched my way to the closet door.

Boomer gave me a look. I knew that look, but I reached out anyways. My fingers curled around the knob. I paused and looked at Boomer again. He leaned against my leg and gave me the false courage to turn it.

I slowly pulled at the knob. With a creak from a hinge well over fifty years old, the door swung open.

There she was.

Martha.

Eyes closed, floating there in her white lacy housecoat. She drifted, like a feather caught in a summer wind. Her arms slowly unraveled, reaching out toward me.

I couldn't blink. Hell, I could barely breathe.

I'd found her.

I reached out and gently touched her hand. Her mouth opened in a kind of smile. Then, slowly, she wound her fingers in mine. Like we used to do when we went for our strolls on cool summer

evenings. Fingers entwined, like a vine climbing a trellis. Worried that she would break, I gently pulled her toward me.

Something pulled back.

Martha's eyes suddenly shot open. Twin pools of darkness stared back at me. They burned when I looked into them, cold and hot at the same time. Then there was the smell. It roiled from her mouth like the stench of an abscessed tooth, a wound gone septic.

The grip changed. Once delicate fingers were now crushing mine. I tried to pull back but couldn't. They were like talons, digging into my flesh. Some sort of dark thing -- a shadow darker than the inside of the closet, darker than her eyes -- rushed forward and surrounded her like an ink blanket.

It wrapped around her, becoming part of her.

Crawling up her legs.

Crawling up her arms.

Crawling toward me.

I tried to jerk my hand free, but whatever had taken hold of Martha was stronger than I could ever be. Then the first bit of blackness fell across my wrist. It was cold, a burning cold that no one

living had felt before and lived to tell of. A cold that cut so deep that I moaned, scaring Boomer from his trance.

Boomer shook his head and barked loudly. He grabbed at my pant leg, trying to pull me to safety.

I looked up at Martha's face. The face that I fell in love with when I first saw her sixty years ago. The face that I kissed every night. The face that made me smile every morning. The face that I loved more than anything in this mortal world.

Then I loosed off a shot of double-ought.

Whatever it was that had me, it let go mighty quick.

I fell backwards in a heap on the floor, Boomer still pulling at my clothes, trying to protect me. I looked up at the closet and saw the dark shape spin and twirl around Martha's pale body. Her face, now a twisted mask of hate, disappeared into the darkness.

In its wild dance, it reached out again and wrapped around my ankle. Its cold, powerful force dragging me into the closet.

I let it have the other barrel.

The darkness let go and, with a terrible wail, drew back into the closet. I thrashed out with my legs and kicked the door closed, then sat up and leaned hard against it, gasping for air.

There was a mighty thumping going on in there. The closet door banged and pushed against me, but I held fast. Boomer and I looked at each other. Sweat ran down my brow as I loaded the 12 with fresh shot.

Then, after a spell, all went quiet.

With a whimper, Boomer curled up in my lap. He drifted off, but I wouldn't sleep. I kept a watchful eye on that door all night long.

The next morning, we sat on the front porch. I gave Boomer his kibble and meds. Then I had some Tennessee sour mash. I had one drink. Then another and another. I guess we both needed our medicine.

When the bottle was done, I threw it into the woods and tried to figure out what comes next. The whole night seemed a long time ago. Like a movie I watched but didn't get to see the ending.

I thought about burning the whole place to the ground, just to punish whatever it was in the closet that took my Martha.

But somehow, that didn't seem right.

Whatever that thing was that took Martha...

Well, maybe -- just maybe -- I'd have another chance to get her back.

So that night, and the night after that, and every night after that, I'd have a drink to warm my belly and keep the fire of hate burning. Then I'd sit propped up with some pillows, photo album open, thumbing past pictures of me and my one true love.

In sixty years she's never given up on me, and I sure as hell would never give up on her.

So until she comes back, Boomer will sleep with his ears toward that closet door.

Me, I'll keep the 12 gauge by the nightstand.

Just in case.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A skills collector by nature, AC TURNER has climbed Mount Fuji, panned for gold, swum with sharks and performed random acts of kindness. He has been a glider pilot, a college lecturer and an award-winning film producer/screenwriter.

After his films "Like Father", "Wing Man" and "Lure" received accolades at festivals around the world, AC turned his creative lens to other forms of storytelling including comic books, short stories and flash fiction.

Having lived in Vancouver, Toronto and Tokyo, AC now calls Halifax, Nova Scotia home.

His creator owned crime/horror comic book, "Frightmare City" can be read online at:

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