

049

Night Visitor

I told Rosie I was concerned about her. Living out there by herself, so far from civilization. Not even a dog. No TV reception. No cell phone signal. No neighbors. Only the wood stove to keep her from freezing. Alone.

She hesitated, turned to regard me, tried to laugh. She said she loved it there. She didn't feel lonely. Not at all. She confided in me. She said there was a special person in her life. They had been together for six weeks. She was in love again and it was so thrilling.

Who, I asked. It was a rural community. Surely I would know him, or could find out more about him.

She wouldn't say. It was too soon. She wrapped herself up in her secret, wore it like a shawl.

Well, give me a hint, I said the next week. Is he widowed or divorced?

She regarded me and squinted her eyes. Why are you so interested?

Then she sighed and said he's widowed.

How old is he?

Well, that's just it. He's 81.

81? 81?

Yes, but he seems like 51. He looks 51. He is so handsome, so spry, so alive. He still runs his own business. He goes hunting with his sons. He is so active.

But he's 81.

Yes, 81.

I try to picture him. I see someone who is 81. Stooped back, small steps. Hair thinning. Weathered face. Hard of hearing. Drives real slow. 81.

The next week I said, just give me a few hints. I think I know.

She studied me and I thought she was going to change the subject.

But she sighed and said he was a prominent man who had created his own business.

I know, I said. It's Jake Schmidt. He created Schmidt Mortuary.

No, she said. She shakes with laughter. Jake is dead.

Are you sure? I had been so certain he was her 81-year-old.

I'm sure, she said. Jake's dead.

The next week I said, what are you doing this weekend?

At first she didn't respond, her hands gripped the steering wheel, but after a time she said, it's his birthday. My special person. He will be 82.

82. He will be 82, I thought. I don't know what to do with this.

What are you going to give him? I ask.

Oh, she said, I ordered a cashmere sweater. It was \$148. I had it delivered to him at work. To surprise him. But when I called to see if he liked it, well, it was obvious it was the wrong thing. He said he didn't even know how to put it on. When I told him to unzip it at the neck and pull it over his head, he was confused. And he said there wasn't a zipper. That it was a silk tunic with no zipper, not even any buttons.

They sent the wrong thing, she said. I'll send it back and get the sweater.

I watched the road. She swerved unexpectedly. I clutched my armrest.

So, will you take him out to eat? On Saturday night? For his birthday, are you going out?

No, she said. I'm going to make a home-cooked meal for him. He's coming to my house. I have it all planned. I'm making a salad with mesculun greens and baby spinach. It will have Craisins and slivered almonds. And I'm making a special dressing with extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar and cherry juice to sweeten it.

I watched two wild turkeys in a field by the road. They were feasting on the remains of the corn crop.

And the main course?

She frowned and flipped on the car radio, twisting up the volume.

Then she said I don't know why you care. I don't want to tell you the entrée. You would be offended. She shrugged and said, I will mix squash and yams as the side dish.

Wine, I suppose, I said.

Yes, he only drinks white zinfandel so I bought those little four ounce bottles. You can get four of them in a pack at the liquor store. I got little ones for him because I will be drinking a merlot, with the entrée, it needs a merlot.

And he can't drink that? The merlot?

Oh no. He only drinks white zinfandel. So he will have the little bottles.

I tried to picture them. Like the ones they sell on the plane?

Oh no, they are larger than that, she said.

I tried to picture them. I couldn't remember ever seeing a wine container that was bigger than the ones on the plane, but smaller than a regular bottle.

Then the dessert. Will it be birthday cake?

No, he doesn't eat sweets. Won't touch them. I am going to have fresh raspberries with crème liquor. That will be the dessert.

The sun had set. It goes down so early this time of year.

On Saturday night I leaned over my kitchen counter and devoured a tuna sandwich. Washed it down with a Diet Coke. I had a couple of little wrapped Snickers bars, remnants of my Halloween collection. Fun size, the bag said. They had been marked down. Half price.

I called my dogs out in the backyard and watched them do their business.

Back in my house, I slid each arm into the sleeve of a flannel shirt and then a sweatshirt over that. I put on a stocking cap, the kind you can pull down to mask your face with holes for your eyes, nose and mouth. I found two matching black gloves. I shoved my feet, covered in wool socks, into my boots and laced them up. I snatched the flashlight from the night-stand by my twin bed.

I motored to the bottom of Rosie's lane and got as far off the road as I could before shifting my car into park. I checked to see if the batteries were still working in the flashlight. It glimmered so I clicked it back off. I slid out and locked up.

I start the steep climb up her road. I have to stop a few times to catch my breath. I need to get to the gym. When I get to the crest of the hill, I hesitate. The moon is a great glowing orb on the horizon.

As I pause, I see a doe. She is quite close to me and I am startled. She stares at me. Her liquid brown eyes reveal no fear. I wait. I know the buck will emerge from the woods any minute. It is rutting season, after all. But no other deer come out of the thicket. She regards me

Night Visitor

for a long time. I stay motionless, returning her gaze. Then she turns and leaps across the lane and bounds down the hill below. Her white furry tail bobs in the moonlight.

I approach the house with caution. Staying back in the trees. The only car on the rutted driveway is Rosie's. I'm early. He isn't here yet.

I crouch down and dart from tree to tree until I get to the old red Gremlin, propped up on blocks in the yard. Rosie's last lover liked to fiddle with engines. He had a fondness for American Motors. Said no other company was quite the same.

Time has eroded the vehicle, its body is rusted and a side window is shattered. Glass shards are strewn on the ground. I peer inside. Despite the gloom, I can see mouse droppings on the seat cushion. I kneel behind the hood and turn to regard Rosie's house.

It is asymmetrical, haphazard. The master bedroom is built up on stilts and not quite on the level, at least from my perspective. A hole had been sundered in the wall of the ramshackle farmhouse to accommodate this recent addition. The windows of the bedroom are dark, forbidding.

In sharp contrast, the dining room is all ablaze. I peer through the gloom. I creep back and forth behind the dilapidated wreck trying to find the best vantage point. On the table, two long tapered candles flicker in pewter holders. A bouquet of colorful mums and asters at the centerpiece. Fine bone china. Silver forks and knives and spoons. A linen napkin curves up like a swan from a place setting.

With no warning, Rosie's face is at the window and I recoil into the darkness. She has on mascara and red lipstick. Her cheeks carefully rouged, her hair pulled back in a burgundy ribbon. I have never seen her with makeup. I am fascinated and want to draw closer, but I remain in the dark seclusion.

After a while I catch the soft strains of opera music. Rosie is bustling back and forth to the table and then into a windowless room and back out again. She has on a soft, cream-colored silk blouse with a large bow tied loosely at her neck. I can't see her shapely legs, but she is wearing a gray tailored skirt or maybe pants, with a tiny belt cinching in her slender waist.

Every so often she approaches the pane and gazes out. Each time she comes to the window, I sink down, almost crawl under the shell of the Gremlin, but I needn't have worried. Her eyes are on the lane, searching for two beams of light. She isn't looking for an intruder crouched down low, out in the cold and gloom, behind the rusty skeleton.

I'm not sure what alerts me, but suddenly my hair stands on end. I sense another presence in the darkness. I inhale sharply. Adrenaline courses through my veins. I turn slowly, very slowly, almost imperceptibly to see who is behind me, what is behind me. At first I can't decipher a thing. My pupils contract, adjusting to the blackness. I see the tall weeds behind me quiver and I choke back a scream. I jump away. A snake is coiled not two feet from me. A hefty one. Its head is raised and its forked tongue is flicking the air. My breath comes in quick gasps. I don't want to alarm it. I just want to get out. I don't even worry about being exposed by the shafts of light from Rosie's glass panes. I back away from the serpent.

It lowers its head and slithers into the tall grass under the car, flicking its tail one last time as it zigzags out of sight.

I take a deep breath and whirl back to the window. Rosie is seated. She is at the table, smiling and hoisting her wine glass with the merlot. Her ruby lips are moving in a toast. He must be there. When did the geezer arrive?

Trying to stay in the shadows, but away from the Gremlin with its snake underneath, I slink under the trees. I try to maneuver so I can see him, the 81-year-old who is now 82. But I can't get a view of the other side of her table.

Rosie's laugh rings out, velvety and sensual, rising above Pavarotti.

I move back into the woods and look for his car. I don't see it. I dash from tree to tree, surveying the whole yard bathed in moonlight. I wipe my eyes, adjust my stocking cap. No, only Rosie's car.

I move back, closer to the window. I fixate on her tender lips, strain to catch her husky voice. Again I attempt to see the wizened old guy, but it is impossible. The window only allows me a view of Rosie, nibbling at the mesculun greens with the Craisins and slivered almonds, beaming at her visitor, sipping her merlot.

So I wait. I keep one eye out for the snake, there in the blackness. I watch for the buck who must surely be following that lithe doe. But mostly I am enthralled by the scene inside the house. The candle flames iridescent. The gold and maroon blooms. Rosie's captivating loveliness.

After the salad, she gets up and carries their plates to the other room. I hold my breath but he doesn't follow her. She comes out with a platter. I lean forward. Are they veal cutlets? I suspected as much. Alongside the slabs of meat are the squash and yams. She seats herself and I can see her full lips trembling, the mirth in her eyes.

I am starting to get stiff from the cold, but I can't bring myself to hike back down that hill. Not yet. I rub my gloved hands together and survey a fallen log. I glance back at the house where Rosie is immersed in conversation. I turn on my flashlight and scrutinize the ground. No snakes. No mice or spiders. I lower myself and flip off the beam.

Then quick, back to the window. Rosie hasn't noticed the brief twinkle out here in the murky woods; she didn't glance out and spy my ray of light. She's tasting a raspberry, plump and succulent, a rarity in November. And she is still gazing at her visitor, seemingly enraptured. She has wrapped herself in a scarlet pashmina. I suck in air as I see how it flatters her complexion, reflects the blush of her delicate cheekbones, her crimson lips. I can't take my eyes off of her. She squeezes each berry and sucks its sweet nectar. I am enchanted by the warm glow. Intrigued by her splendor.

After the berries have been consumed, she rises to clear the dishes. Only then do I contemplate how much my back is aching. I stand and survey the encroaching woods. The snake, the possibility of a rutting buck, the scuttling of little feet. I consider returning home.

Slouching down on my decaying log, I gaze at the house one last time.

But she is no longer there. I study each consecutive window in dismay. No one is at the table. The ceiling light is extinguished. Only one candle flickers. Where is the other? My eyes search.

And then I see the inviting circle of light in Rosie's bedroom. It is progressing from pane to pane towards the back. Someone is carrying the missing taper to the king-size bed. I stretch to see through the elevated windows. The shimmer of light. The candle is there, but darkness shrouds the chamber.

I linger until my toes and fingers are numb from the cold. The last strains of Pavarotti echo through the gloom. Then the night is still.