

## To The Dawn

The needle pushed as far as it could go past E, an empty cry going unheard. The engine of the old Ford sputtered out gently, a contrast to the 90 plus miles per hour it had spent the day and first part of the night doing. Lloyd Allen, with a curse upon the car, eased the '63 Galaxie onto the shoulder and into an unseen ditch.

“Chrome bastard,” Lloyd addressed the car and checked his watch. 10:11 p.m. There was so much night left, and December cold had her fingers around everything.

Lloyd got out of the car, slamming the door. He pulled at his jacket trying to get it to fit tighter on him, and turned to the road, beginning his long march. Not a minute in, snow started falling, chunks of white pelted the ground and Lloyd. He went on annoyed. The snow prickled on the ground softly as it fell. Lloyd cursed the snow and kicked at it.

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Brielle Cerdwin saw Lloyd. She stood in her doorway ignoring the cold and watching him stomp toward her little house. She reached into a pocket on her ragged dress and pulled out a ribbon. She tied her thick hair back with it and huffed at the man.

“Hey,” Lloyd called out as he neared the woman. He looked up at her shack-house with tin hanging from the bent roof and gray wood-boards crooked on the sides. “Do you have a phone?” Numbing from the cold, he rubbed at his arms. “A phone? Do you have a phone?”

“Nope. I ain't got one of those. Ain't got nobody to call yet.” Brielle stepped out on her porch, which was just a few boards with the tin roof extended

a bit.

"Anyone else living around here?" he asked. "Christ, what a place to live."

"Nope. Not for a long ways anyway you go. Just me and my boy."

"You have a car?"

"Nope. Ain't got no place I need to be other than here."

"Look. I have to come in. I'm freezing."

Brielle waited a moment and then stepped out of the man's way. He hurried past her and into her house.

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I'm going to fall through the floor, Lloyd thought as he entered the woman's kitchen. The floor, bare gray boards, bent as he put weight on them. As for the kitchen, there was a wood-burning stove next to a table with a floral-patterned cloth on it. Kerosene lamps sat on the table and near a sink. All along the walls hung drawings of flowers, fruit, and vegetables. Lloyd sat down on a rickety chair next to the table and stove which had pot simmering atop it. Something brown-green frothed inside and gave a sour-weedy smell. The kitchen smelled as well, sweet and earthy like somebody had chopped flowers up and hidden them under the floorboards. Lloyd didn't care. It was warmer next to the stove with the smelly stuff than outside in the snow.

Lloyd looked at the woman who still stood at the open door. She was tall and pale skinned with round eyes of amber that he didn't like. They seemed to see all of him at once.

"Shut the door," he said. "It's freezing. You can watch snow through the windows. I know you people don't know what it looks like since it never snows here. I heard enough of that on the radio today. People panicking just because there was a chance of snow." He thought about those chances and thought that

once again the weathermen had been drinking because there was a lot more than a chance of snow falling outside.

“Ain't watching the snow.” Brielle closed her door and went to the sink. She drew a glass of water and drank deep.

“Power out?”

“Nope. Don't need it so never got it.”

“What year do you think it is?” Lloyd checked his watch. 10:27. “Lady, would you die of surprise if somebody microwaved some popcorn in front of you?”

Brielle ignored him. “You need a blanket? I bet the cold has had fun with you tonight?”

Lloyd tugged at his jacket and tried to figure out if the woman was smarting off to him, but he assumed she had no lip to give. “Yes, a blanket would help.”

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The blanket surprised Lloyd first. It was frayed, dark gray with patterns of faded flowers. The second surprise was the woman's son. Bulky and sloping, he stood straight and cast shadows on everything behind him. His face was round with dark eyes. He grinned and blushed as he held out the blanket.

Lloyd, still painfully cold, took the blanket and placed it on his lap.

“Thank you, Chal,” Brielle said.

“Chal?” Lloyd thought that maybe the woman had tried to spell Chad at his birth and missed and never had the heart to tell Chal.

“I'm Brielle Cerdwin, and this here is my strong boy, Chal.”

“Hello.” Chal spoke loud and blushed more.

“Alright. Anybody else here?” Lloyd asked.

"Nope," Brielle said. "Just me and Chal."

"Well, where is your nearest neighbor? How far away is that? I need to get to a phone."

Brielle shook her head and shrugged her slender shoulders. "I don't know how far. But it's a good ways. A day's walk if you have the wind to your back. And it ain't a good day right now with this snow. It's the longest night, too, which ain't never helped nothing."

Lloyd tapped on the table and nodded. He wasn't about to go back outside tonight. That's what he thought anyway and was wrong. But that's for later. Right now, he sat slowly warming in Brielle Cerdwin's kitchen where the only thing to do was wait until Dawn.

"I guess I'm going to be with you people for a while," Lloyd announced.

Brielle frowned, and Chal appeared gleeful but still couldn't look at Lloyd.

"Have a seat." Lloyd pointed at the other chairs at the table. "I don't like people standing around and staring at me." He checked his watch. 10:48. "It's going to be a long night."

"Longest of the year." Brielle sat down easy. She pointed for Chal to sit and he did. "Yep. The longest night. I hate it, but we got to go through it."

"So, what is it that you do here?" Lloyd asked.

Brielle, with a half-smile, began talking of her garden, about her flowers that were always strong enough to sprout no matter how deep she planted them, how far apart she planted corn and watermelons, and how often she had to pick peaches and nectarines. Chal bounced at the mention of nectarines. Brielle went on about lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, grapes, peas, figs, squash, pears, two kinds of oranges, three kinds of apples, and four kinds of berries.

Then she began to talk about spring and the coming life it would bring.

Lloyd tried to tune her out. He didn't care about the return of spring or how "the equinox will turn back round right" as Brielle proclaimed. He just wanted to warm up and for the dawn to come.

"Okay. Okay." He held up his hand. Brielle stopped talking. "How about some more firewood for the stove? Let's see if we can get it a little warmer in here in."

Brielle sat back in her chair with a rained-on look. Lloyd expected her to start up about spring and explain how warmth will come then, but instead she stood and excused herself. She had to go outside to get more wood. Chal stayed at the table not looking at Lloyd.

"You want some tea?" Chal asked, suddenly blurting out the words ask if a bad taste in his mouth.

"What?" Lloyd asked a bit surprised.

"Tea." Chal jumped up and ran to the cupboard. He flung the door open, and inside sat different jars of light brown, dark brown, light and dark green, yellow, blue, and even clear tea. "Tea. I love tea. I can make tea out of anything."

"That so?"

"Yeah. You want some tea? Got some heating." Chal took a wooden spoon from the sink and stirred the pot on the stove. Lloyd had never seen tea that looked and smelled like the stuff in the pot. He wouldn't taste it for money.

"I'm making pointy-berry tea. I ain't done that before, but I bet it's good." Chal picked up a flower from a windowsill. With care, he placed it in front of Lloyd. "Pointy-berry."

Lloyd looked at the flower, dark green with small pointy leaves and white berries, and didn't recognize it for a moment. Then he had it. It wasn't a flower.

It was mistletoe.

“You're not making tea out of this?”

“Yep. I bet it's good.”

“Okay. I bet it is, too. I also bet you can't drink the whole thing.” Lloyd pulled his wallet out and took a twenty from it. He laid the money on the table. “I bet you \$20 whole dollars you can't drink it all by yourself.”

Chal huffed and stepped back. He gnawed on his fingers and then sallied about with glee.

“Really?” Chal giggled.

“Yep. Drink it all and the \$20 is yours. All yours.”

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Brielle stoked the stove fire. Lloyd sat slowly warming. Chal sat at the table with his third glass of mistletoe tea lingering in front of him. After Chal's second glass, Lloyd slipped the twenty into his pocket. Brielle never noticed and smiled at Chal being enthused about his tea. But now, Chal slowed and looked sullen and swelling. He occasionally grasped his stomach tightly. He never spoke up and kept sipping his tea. Eventually, Chal laid his head on the table and went to sleep.

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Lloyd checked his watch and refused to believe it was 11:03.

“Lady, what time is it?” he asked Brielle.

Brielle stood at the sink washing dishes. She turned to him and then looked down.

“Wait,” Lloyd said. “You tell time by an old fashion sundial, and you're waiting on the noonday-sun on a spring day to set it?”

Chal slumped sideways and fell to the floor, shaking the house. Lloyd

wondered why Chal didn't go through the floorboards. Brielle screamed and fell on her boy. She asked Lloyd what was wrong with Chal. Lloyd said he didn't know.

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"11:12." Lloyd ripped his watch from his arm and threw it against the wall. "The damn cold must have killed my watch. I've been in this shack for at least four hours."

Brielle sat silent in the floor running her fingers through Chal's hair. Chal had paled and his eyes, slightly open, were hollow and blown.

"He's going to be okay," she said. "Sure thing. I just know it."

Lloyd rubbed his arms and put his head back. He had to get out of here, but the night was taking forever, his constant partner always wanting to hold hands.

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Brielle cradled her boy and cried. Lloyd watched her and became concerned, but not over the well being of Chal.

"You are not going to go for help for him," Lloyd said.

"What?" Brielle sat back but didn't let go of Chal.

"You are not going to go for help. No calling the police or calling an ambulance. So get that out of your head right now."

"You think he needs help," Brielle said.

Lloyd didn't want to hear anymore from the woman. He reached into his jacket and produced a .44, which he had already used twice today. "Be quiet. You are not going to say another word. And you are not going to get help. We are waiting on the dawn, and then I am out of here. Now shut up and sit there."

Brielle continued to weep, and Lloyd kept the gun on her. He thought

about just shooting her but he only had three bullets left. He might need those and didn't want to waste them.

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Lloyd was so warm and drifting, passing through darkness toward sick light. But something dim chased him, actually two things, two thoughts. The first was that he was being watched, and the second was that he no longer had his gun. He had been asleep and slowly came back. He didn't feel his gun in his hand so he opened his eyes.

Brielle Cerdwin stood next to him. Her eyes were wide and tearful but focused deeply on him. She had an iron skillet raised above her head. And when she saw him wake, she brought it down across his face.

Lloyd's nose broke and bled. His head rung as if made of iron like the skillet. He actually tried to run, but he fell back and away from the table. He ended up on the floor which blurred into two different floors, one with him and the other with Chal. For a second, Lloyd thought Chal rolled over and smiled at him with a big monkey grin.

Brielle hit Lloyd again, this time on the back of his head. Lloyd bit into his tongue and fell forward. He pushed hard against the floor feeling as if it was atop him and suffocating him. By accident, he flung his arm above his head and partially blocked Brielle's next blow.

Surprised at feeling desperate for the first time in his life, Lloyd began kicking wildly. His first kick broke a table leg, but the table stayed upright. His second kick caught Brielle on her side and sent her back and down. She landed next to the stove and lost hold of her skillet.

Lloyd kicked at the floor and pushed himself toward the door. Once there, he actually found a way to stand and open the door. His vision was still split, and

he couldn't hear. He stumbled out into the night and tried running, but fell often, usually to his left. The cold bit at him with long and hooked teeth. Eventually, he did get going and stayed on his feet. He ran in a crooked line and managed to dodge trees that moved on him.

Long he ran and hard in the frozen abyss of night, which slowly took him. Lloyd ended lying on the snow surrounded by pink patches of his own spilled life.

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Dawn came and was welcomed. The sun rose bright, cleared the sky, and warmed everything as if spring. Two shadows helped by the sun draped across Lloyd's body in the melting snow.

"Well, I sure am glad that's over," Brielle Cerdwin calmly said. "Longest night. Sure is. I hate it, but we got to do it. Now it's over, and we can go on and get spring moving toward us."

"Yea, mamma," Chal said standing tall and straight next to his mother. He wore a fresh grin with rosy cheeks. "I can't wait. Tell me about the garden again."

"Oh sugar, we gonna have such a garden...." Brielle and Chal walked back to their warm home talking about all the wonderful things that they would plant, grow, and share, and that there would be so many things.

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