

## THE BITE OF WINTER

### KENJAMIN LIDDLE

The Cheshire moon hung low in the evening sky. The air was cold, a frost that bit reproachfully at exposed fingers and ears. The long, wide avenues of the industrial district lay empty and quiet, the pallor of the moonlight giving everything below an ethereal hue. Most of the street lamps had burnt out, and the only contrasting light came from a lonely trashcan fire, blazing defiantly in the oppressive winter night.

An old man stood silently, hoping to stave off the vengeful cold. He hunched before the fire, his stooped shoulders exaggerated by layers of shabby coats. His hands were held out, mere inches from the dancing flames, the fingers of his gloves having been lost to time. As he struggled to find comfort amid the bitter night, he lifted a bottle to his lips, and drained the last mouthful. His eyes clenched close as he swallowed, and he shivered. He took a minute to stare at the bottle in his hand before hurling it into the darkness, the breaking glass oddly muted in the all-encompassing night. He watched where it had landed for a time, dark broken glass shining in the limited moonlight.

As he gazed towards the remnant of his succor, he heard the echoing sound of footsteps, bouncing against the walls and from the shadows around his fire. The pace was languid at first. But when propagated from all sides, they began to sound frenzied. He raised his hands to block the firelight from his face, hoping to peer into the darkness.

“Hello? Who’s there?” Something intensified in the chill around him, and he shook with momentary apprehension. The shadows began to adjust, and from them stepped a young woman. The old man exhaled with relief. He didn’t know what had come over him, but he smiled, shaking his head, and beckoned his new companion nearer.

“Please,” she said.

“There’s no need to be afraid. I won’t bite,” he said, mustering what little mirth he had. “If you’d like to warm yourself, there’s plenty of fire for everyone.” he said, making an expansive gesture, which only elicited a flinch from the woman.

She shifted her feet, moving somewhat around the perimeter of the light, her eyes flickering in the shifting flames. She took a half step into the firelight, and the old man felt his stomach lurch. She had dozens of scratches and bruises on her face and legs, and what appeared to be dried

blood on her shirt and sleeves. She was very thin, and her clothes left less to the imagination than was seasonable. Her hands were buried in the pockets of a ragged, faded, tarnished peacoat, and she possessed eyes brimming with a sadness that humbled the old man. She felt his eyes on her, and looked away in silence. The old man knew his gaze was lingering too long, and turned back to the flames, still watching her figure in the corner of his eye.

After a moment the wind picked up, and she shivered, taking the remaining few hurried steps nearer to the blazing trashcan, greeting the warmth with a sigh, although she kept her hands tucked away rather than holding them over the flames. A minute of silence passed between the two, before the old man spoke up:

“So, how long has a young lady like yourself been out here? This spot used to be much more crowded, even in freezes this bad. Half the bums in the city would post up here’bouts. Haven’t seen more than a few others out lately, not even at the shelter.”

The woman replied in the form of a long, doleful look, her lip quivering in the orange fire glow.

“Well,” he replied, sensing her response was evident, “I’ve been out here for what might be, nine years? eleven? Easy to lose track of time when you haven’t got a reason to keep it. Days slide into each other on the street, weeks blur together. Years pass right on by, and here I am, just waiting out however much time I got,” his voice caught, and he began coughing, a wracking sound that filled the firelit circle. The young woman watched him, her face unmoving.

“The name’s Rufus, by the way,”

“Lily,” replied the woman, her lips barely parting.

“Lily? That’s a lovely name,” he nodded to himself, “lovely name, lovely flower. My daughter’s name was ‘Iris’, same story. She’d probably be about your age...” he trailed off, his eyes shimmering, and he stared hard into the embers, as though trying to recall her face.

“Tell me about her,” Rufus looked up, incredulous, but Lily didn’t react.

“You don’t want to hear none of it, I won’t trouble you by telling it.”

“Tell me about ‘Iris’,” Lily had hardly moved since she took her place at the fireside, but slowly, slowly, she seemed to unwind, rolling her shoulders

and stretching her neck. This show of comfort registered on some level, and Rufus nodded.

“She was...the brightest person I’ve ever known. Not just smart, but cheerful, smile from ear to ear. As a child, she would run laughing, everywhere, stopping only to catch her breath or wait for her mother or I to catch up, and then sprint away, giggling again. She never met a puzzle she couldn’t solve or a stranger she couldn’t make her friend. She was the joy in my life. Every drop of it.”

As he spoke, Lily watched him rapturously, watching his face light up with the joy of recollection.

“Iris wasn’t our only child, but she was my favorite. She could recite poems and songs and scripture, beat the stitches off a softball, and when she was five, she decided she would make pancakes on Saturdays. Every week she would ruin the kitchen trying to make flapjacks, and after two months of waking up to my hangover and the sound of the smoke detector, I’ll be damned if she didn’t wake me up one morning with a stack so nice it looked like it came off the box.”

“Ah, that sounds so good right now.”

“Hungry?”

“You’ve no idea,” Lily said, looking down, “I don’t remember the last time I ate something as nice as pancakes,”

“Yeah, I-” Rufus faltered, “I had some whiskey, but that ran out on me, too.”

“Keep going, about Iris,” Lily pressed, “don’t talk about food. When was the last time you spoke to her.”

“Oh no, no,” Rufus shook his head, his demeanor shifting, “no, that I try to forget-”

But she shut her eyes and turned her head, straining into the darkness.

“something’s coming.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Rufus replied, confused. Lily was quiet, her fingers working at the corners of the pockets.

In the hush that followed, the sound of an engine began to tug at the edges of their awareness. After a few minutes, a quarter mile further on, a jeep turned the corner, and continued towards them. It drove slowly, unhurried, with unknown intentions but clearly of purpose. As the car drew near, Lily grew uneasy, one hand reaching quickly to smooth her hair. She moved to place both the trashfire and the old man between herself and the vehicle. Rufus noted her apprehension, and turned more to face the car. From within, he could see two figures silhouetted, and as they slowed to a stop at the curbside, the passenger rolled down his window, the scent of cigarette smoke and final call pouring out like a London fog.

“Hey sugar, you working tonight?” called the driver, his voice crass and thick with booze. Neither Rufus nor Lily made reply, so the driver continued, “my friend and I are looking for some company, figure you might like to go

for a little ride?”

Rufus looked at Lily. She was shivering, but with what must have been fear rather than chills. He could see her downcast eyes, looking about her for an exit or an opportunity to flee.

“What’s wrong, honey, my friend and I know how to have fun. And it’s warm in here, yeah, nice and warm. How about it?”

“I don’t think she’s-” Rufus began.

“We wasn’t talking to you, old man.” the passenger said.

“I just was saying that your pretty friend might want to spend some time with us, rather than freeze her sweet ass off with a worthless old shit like you.” the driver clicked his tongue, “hey sweet thing, don’t act like you aren’t interested. We’ve got plenty of booze here if you’re thirsty, give you something to wrap your lips around.”

“She’s not interested,” said Rufus, “why don’t you two find some other people to bother.”

The passenger door opened, and the occupant stepped out. Rufus began to react but in a single swift motion the passenger drew a flashlight and clubbed Rufus in the temple with it. Rufus grunted and crumpled, gasping in surprise and pain.

“‘People’? You think you’re people? All you are is a worthless old man.”

he punctuated his words with kicks, and finally knelt on Rufus’ back, “not very smart, are you? Figured being so old, someone might’ve taught you some respect.”

“Leave him be,” said Lily, her voice barely registering to the passenger, “you don’t have to hurt him.”

“You hear that? She can talk after all,” the driver called, unphased by his friend’s apparent violent outburst. “So, how’s about it? You want to party now, is that it? Only took roughing up your daddy a little bit. No harm in it.”

Rufus tried to protest from the ground, but felt the pressure of a knee in the center of his back, and could do nothing but look up in dismay as Lily stepped beyond the firelight and towards the car.

“Do you- do you have a smoke?” she said as she reacted the window.

The driver looked taken aback for a moment, but nodded. He pulled one from the pack at his breast, and made to hand it over when she said, “light it for me.”

The driver stuck it in his lips and flicked a lighter, the flash of illumination revealing the intensity in Lily’s eyes for a brief moment. He held out the lit cigarette, but rather than grab it, Lily leaned in, her lips parting expectantly. She pulled on a finger, then another finger, and then, cigarette.

“I’ll go with you, but please,” she said, after a deep exhalation, her voice filled with apprehension, “one at a time.”

“No, Lily, don’t. You don’t have to get into his car,” Rufus said from the ground, “you don’t have to. Don’t do it, Lily, don’t-”

“Alright, man, you take first go,” the passenger said, as he held Rufus’

head to the ground, "I'm gonna stay here with the geezer, make sure he doesn't do anything...rash."

Lily gave an inscrutable look back at the two, then pulled opened the door, and slid into the seat. The driver put the car into gear, and began to pull away.

Rufus began to whimper slightly, muttering to himself "no, Lily, not like this. Don't get into his car, not again."

As the car started to pick up speed, it suddenly swerved wildly, punctuated by a shriek and the vehicle careening into a lamp post. The passenger, shouted, and began running towards the accident, uncertainty slowing his steps as he neared the crash.

Rufus watched in horror as the post crumpled and fell, crashing into the roof of the car, but the screaming continued. It was unearthly, a howl of agony and fear. The car thrashed, and shook, and the driver's door flew open, but nobody emerged. The wailing continued for another moment, but was just as suddenly silenced, leaving the street throbbing in the lull. As the passenger came alongside the Jeep, he squinted into the windows, apprehension filling his movements, finally drawing near to the ajar driver's side door. As he peered into the bloodied cab, a hand struck out and caught him by the calf. He screamed, and the sound of rending denim and flesh carried back to Rufus, watching transfixed from the ground. The man turned, and began frantically hobbling away, shouting incoherently, fear etched onto his face.

The passenger, trailing blood, lurched by Rufus, terror-stricken and babbling, but Rufus watched the jeep still. No one had emerged. There was no sign of life from within.

"Not like this. Not again. no Iris, no..." Rufus pushed himself to his feet, and began to move towards the crash, "I can't lose you again. No..."

To his surprise, Lily then stepped from the car. The headlights were still on, so she was framed in their illumination. But she was different. Her peacoat was missing, her hair was matted, she stood straight and peered around herself, eyes piercing into the dark. No longer meek or hesitant, but assured, calm, relaxed. She reached back into the car to remove a few objects, and then turned back to Rufus.

He saw her now. He saw what she was. Saw the gore covering her maw, saw the fresh blood, ebon in the moonlight, coating her hands and chest. He filtered, and as she drew nearer, he fell to his knees, paralyzed with fear. She drew on a new coat, stolen from within the car, and admired it in the moonlight as she reached the old man. She regarded him for a long minute, steam rising from the cooling viscera, before she spoke.

"Will you not run from me?"

Rufus could only moan slightly, and shake his head. She stopped at a splatter of blood on the asphalt, and brought some to her lips. Her eyes closed in exaltation. A dark bottle was produced from the depth of the coat,

and she placed it on the ground before Rufus. She opened her eyes and stared off into the darkness where the passenger had fled.

"Pity, I enjoy running," she said gently, as she prowled off into the night.