



BEYOND THE NIGHT

By Marlo Schalesky

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PROLOGUE

They tell me it never happened. They say it couldn't have. Some call it a dream. Others say I'm a romantic. But I know what they're thinking. I'm crazy. Lost in grief. Making up stories to ease my pain. But I have no grief. Not anymore. And my pain is only a single note in the symphony of my peace. For I know what's true. I was there that day. I saw her hand reach toward him. I heard her voice speak in the darkness.

So call me crazy if you must. But I know the power of love. I've glimpsed its mystery. I've touched its light.

If you doubt, come with me. Step through the shadows of time to when it began. A cold night. Dark. And beyond the night . . . well, come and see.

* * *

Paul gripped the steering wheel tighter as the Ford Pinto curved along the mountain road. Rain fell in heavy sheets, slamming against hood and pavement. The swish of the wipers played a dissonant beat to the thrum of water on metal.

This is mad. We should turn back. Paul glanced at his wife, sleeping in the seat beside him. Maddie's breathing remained steady, her eyes closed. A deep snore drifted from her open mouth.

Paul smiled. Maddie hated it when he told her she snored. "It's not snoring," she'd say, "just strong breathing." Strong enough to be heard over the rain. Of course, she'd never believe him. One day, he'd record it, if he dared. His smile melted into a low chuckle. She'd never forgive him for that. At least not until he brought her a Hershey's bar, with almonds. The chocolate was no good, she insisted, without the almonds.

The rain quickened until the sound became a thunder on the rooftop. Paul leaned forward and squinted into the darkness. The car's headlights formed circles of yellow, reflecting off the rain in countless shards of light. He rubbed his eyes. He couldn't see the lane divider, or the white line along the shoulder. Or the road that lay beyond the million falling diamonds blinking in the brightness.

"Are we there?" The sleepy question rose above the roar of rain.

"Not yet." Paul's knuckles whitened on the wheel. "We're going to be late."

"Told you so." The humor in her voice relaxed his grip.

He peeked over at her. A few curls of russet hair gleamed in the faint light. A smile touched her lips, curving into that funny half-grin that he loved so much.

He reached over and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "Go back to sleep, smarty pants. I'll get us there...eventually."

"It's too loud in here to sleep." Maddie raised her voice to a mock shout. "This rain is like listening to a bad rock band."

Paul slapped a tape into the player on the dash. “You just need the right music, that’s all.”

Maddie groaned. “Not that old tape again.”

“What else?”

The soft strum of a guitar clamored against the rumble of rain. A second later, voices picked up the story of Puff the Magic Dragon just as Jackie Paper came no more. Paul sang along, adding another off-key note to the cacophony of sound.

Maddie reached for the volume control. “You know that song’s about marijuana, don’t you?”

“Urban legend. Can’t be proved.” Paul tapped his fingers on the wheel in time with the song’s beat. “Besides, Mandy agrees with me.”

“She’s only five.”

“Exactly. No one knows more than a five-year-old.”

Maddie chuckled as Paul sang even louder. He belted out a full stanza before she sat up straight and pressed her hand against the side window. “Turn it down, Paul.”

“Aw, just because you don’t like Puff.”

“No, really.” She leaned over and squeezed his arm. “Listen to that rain. It’s coming down so hard I could feel the window shaking. Maybe we should pull over.”

Paul ground his palms against the vinyl of the steering wheel. “The road straightens out just ahead. Besides, ten minutes and we’ll be there.”

“Promise?”

He downshifted as the Pinto approached a turn. “Nope. Might be fifteen.”

The car lurched around the bend. Tires hit a puddle in the road, sending a spray of water across the hood and window. The wipers whooshed it away, revealing, for the briefest moment, a deer standing in the circle of the headlights. The creature froze. Still. Wide-eyed.

Paul shouted. Brakes squealed. The Pinto swerved right. He jerked the wheel left. Tires skidded across gravel as the car spun off the road into the trees. Branches slapped the sides of the Pinto, scraped across the windows in a blur of water, leaves, and glass. He threw his arm across Maddie.

The trunk of a pine flashed in front of him. Then, the car hit. The steering wheel slammed into his chest. The dash rushed toward him, carrying with it a small square of color. With sickening clarity, the colors took shape, and he recognized the Polaroid photo he'd taped there days before. A little girl in pigtails. A crooked half-smile. And words scrawled beneath in childish script. Words he did not need to read to remember.

Drive Carefully Daddy.

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