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A Storm in Gundrin

Jon Camp

Jon writes "[T]he story grew from the poem 'Night Storm'... written in the 70's." If you'd like to see a chapbook of Jon G. Camp's Two Worlds write him at 110 Margaret Dr. Monroe LA 71203.

It is a cold Yuletide Eve and Gaffner is watching the winter storm from his window. As the wind grows stronger, the frozen branches of the trees begin to bend and snap. The limbs fall to the ground. Icy twigs break away and scurry along with the pounding gusts. They fly along the snow piled along the pathway that separates the two rows of houses.

Now, the wind picks up twigs, dried leaves and the smaller limbs and drops them onto the roof. Masking his fear of what is even now approaching the town, Gaffner seeks to soften the somber mood that is filling the room. He looks at his little daughter and asks, "Listen, Helma, there's something scratching up on the housetop. Maybe it's Father Yule. Should we let him in?"

Caren, Gaffner's wife, snaps, "Stop that Gaffner. Let's have no games on such a night. You'll frighten Helma."

The winter gale pushes the snow along, all the way to the edge of the village. Then, up the hill it rises to the circle of stones that lie in a little clearing among the trees. Under their white blanket, the stones lie quietly, waiting for Spring. In the Springtime, the people will come, singing and feasting. But now, there is only a dead world of ice for the stones to contemplate. Gaffner steps across the room and sits down near the hearth with its Yulelog burning warm and bright. "Caren, Helma, let's have a little song. After all, it's Yuletide Eve." Caren says, "First, let me fix some tea. It will be good on such a cold night." She gets the kettle, fills it, and sets it on the hearth to heat. Gaffner and Helma move closer to the warmth of the fire, and wait. Soon, the kettle sounds its whistle. Caren prepares the tea and pours three cups. She brings them and sits near the fire, herself.

Gaffner says, "Now, let us sing."

Singing at Yuletide is a tradition in all the families of Gundrin. Huddled by the fire, the three sing a few of the songs that have been sung since the ancients first sang them. Then, they settle down in front of the fire to wait out the night.

Helma asks her mother, "Why do you and Father stay up on the night before Yule?"

Caren answers, "There is always a storm in Gundrin on Yuletide Eve. So your father and I stay awake in case there is any damage to the house. In winter, we must make

repairs at once."

Helma cannot remember many Yuletide Eves so the explanation satisfies her. It is not long before Caren's brew has its effect and Helma's eyes begin to show the need for sleep.

A rattling at the window startles everyone. Helma is once again wide awake. The sound frightens her. She can only whisper, "What was that, Father? What was it?"

Gaffner tells her, "It was just some icicles falling from the roof and hitting the window. That is all. Now, why don't you go to sleep? Tomorrow is Yule and we have a wonderful day waiting for us."

Helma says, "I'm just not sleepy," but the hot tea, made with the dried herbs saved from Caren's fall garden, continues to impose its will on the child. It is only a while longer before Helma is asleep on her pallet in front of the fire.

Caren breaks the silence that has settled around them, "I hate to do that, but if the animals break in, she won't know." Many times, Gaffner has seen Caren trying to busy herself into forgetfulness. He knows she is a strong-willed woman. But her face often betrays the concern and guilt she feels for her part in what is to come. Nevertheless, even with the agony of each Yuletide she keeps them to herself and trembles with fear in private.

Gaffner assures his wife, "I am glad that you have the wisdom to help her sleep through such a night." Then, the obviously worried father rises and goes to look out the window again. There are no stars, no moon. The sky is black with frigid clouds over all of Gundrin. They coat everything with an icy glaze. Without the fire, the house would be a cold and dreadful place.

Caren, almost to herself, says, "If we had sons, it would not be so bad."

"Don't say that. Helma is all a father could ever hope to have."

"It's not the same. If you had sons to help . . ."

Gaffner breaks in, "Perhaps . . . but I am happy with Helma. I will guard her always."

"I know you will, Gaffner." It is as much a plea as a statement.

Gaffner says, "Caren . . . , the night's not yet over."

Even with the screaming of the wind, the Ravens can be heard cawing to the wolf pack. Nothing else that flies can withstand the wind. All other winged creatures flee

the winter gale. It is the Ravens' lot to call, obeying the ritual cast into them by the town's sisters.

Now, the storm rises. The larger branches are torn from the trees and even the trees themselves bend almost to the ground. The wind becomes a deafening roar.

Caren is becoming more openly concerned, but there is really nothing to be said, or done. The waiting has now begun. "Why do we stay here in Gundrin? Yuletide isn't like this in other towns."

"It was twelve of Gundrin's own women . . ."

"I know that!" interjects Caren, not wanting to hear what her husband was going to say. Then she adds, "Everyone in town thought it was a good idea. No one wanted to see a child - not even the worst kind - be sent up the mountain if the sickness came. Something had to be done. We all thought it was a practical solution. If I had known it would come to this, I would have left the circle."

"It's too late now. It was just a good idea that got out of hand. As for the sickness, it's just part of our people. Some children. The worst thing is not knowing. As bad as having to kill your own child was, banishment to the mountain was worse. That is either a slow death or a violent one. This way, it is quick. And with the tea, it is painless. The sisters were wise to provide a solution, and no mother's throat is going to be ripped out by her own demented child." Gaffner is silent for a few moments, pondering what he has said, and then remarks, "Maybe we're all sick."

Caren murmurs, "Maybe." Then, almost nonchalantly, she notes, "I believe Antra Gorsen was planning to leave one out."

Gaffner cranes his neck against the window and looks down the path. "Yes, one is out. It's that little devil of theirs. He gets worse every day. It is good to let him go with the pack."

"Sarishta believes that one of us simply wasn't sure we should be doing it. Maybe that's it. Maybe we just didn't have the will. Maybe the herbs weren't right."

Gaffner suggests, "We'll just have to deal with it."

The doors and windows are straining under the battering of the wind-blown snow. When the onslaught increases even more so, Gaffner knows it is almost time. He gets his axe and returns to the window. "Caren, get the small axe. Stand beside the other window. I believe the door will hold but the windows are weak."

Looking out again, Gaffner sees the wolf pack coming down the pathway between the houses. They stop at the Gorsen house and turn toward the door. They snarl and fight among themselves as each beast pushes forward to get a taste. Even with the roar of the wind, Gaffner can still hear the sounds of bones being crushed in powerful jaws. He thinks to himself, "Surely Antra used the tea."

Satisfied momentarily, the animals leave the Gorsens' house and head straight toward the window where Gaffner

is standing. The snow has completely covered the yard fence. It is no longer a barrier to the animals' advance. They stop on the porch at the window and wait. There is nothing for them here. They bare their teeth and begin their ominous growling. After a moment, they dash straight at Gaffner's window.

As the leader crashes through, broken glass flies across the floor all the way to where Helma is sleeping. The great head protrudes into the room. Before the brute can claw its way inside, Gaffner swings his axe down on its forehead. Its skull splits open and brains spill. The pack brothers pull their dead leader out of the window and prepare to attack again. One goes to the other side of the door and looks up at the window that Caren is guarding. Apparently, Caren's window appears too small so it comes back.

Frustrated with their initial failure to break in through the windows, most of the wolves head down the path to try the other houses. Three remain and turn their attention to the door. They stand side by side and then rush straight ahead.

The loud strike at the door is ominous. "They are trying to break it down," screams Caren, "Oh, Mother Earth, they were never supposed to enter the houses."

Gaffner shouts, "Move to the door with me. Maybe it will stop them."

Another smash by the pack weakens the door posts. Gaffner sees one start to give and again shouts to Caren, "It's not going to hold! Move back to the hearth."

The beasts make a third attack on the door, and one of the posts fails. The opening is just enough for one animal to get through at a time. Luckily, this opening satisfies them. They abandon their attack on the door, itself, and begin clawing their way through the new opening.

The first one gets inside the room. It sees Helma and immediately heads for the hearth. Gaffner and Caren are standing in front of their daughter and their axes speak. The first beast falls to the floor in a spreading pool of its own blood.

A second beast breaks in and rushes to the attack. It comes closer to Caren, so she makes the first swing. Her small axe only manages to wound the creature. This makes it even more determined. So, after a quick retreat to the center of the room, it dashes forward again. Luckily, the wound from Caren's axe has slowed it a little. Gaffner and Caren both strike. Their axes do their work and this creature is also soon dead in another pool of blood.

The first two have widened the opening between and door post and the wall. This allows the third one to get through. When Gaffner sees it, his heart sinks. This one is fully twice as large as any he has ever seen. He raises his axe and waits. He is determined that the monster will not feed on Helma.

The beast stands for a moment, apparently assessing

the situation before attacking. It sees Helma, inclines its head to the side, and for a brief moment, it responds with just a flicker of a gentler underlying nature. However, the hunger for the flesh of the child soon becomes overwhelming. The beast cannot resist the curse of the sisters. Baring its fangs and screeching a wild and ancient howl, it streaks for the hearth, ignoring the danger of the axe..

Gaffner braces himself for the attack. When the beast is almost at Helma's throat, Gaffner brings his axe down on the beast's neck. It severs the its head from the shoulder. The head flies forward, tumbles across Helma's sleeping figure, and comes to rest in the fire. Its great jaws open once in a silent scream of death and then the flames end the agony. Its body lies on the floor, the still beating heart spurting a meaningless crimson flood over the sleeping child.

Helma awakens early the next morning. She does not

realize that she is wearing a different nightgown and is on a new pallet. Nor does she notice any of the few faint red stains that remain on the floor. Her father is just finishing the repair to the window. The door is already back in place. Helma asks, "Father, was there much damage to our house?"

Gaffner reassures his little daughter, "No, my precious, there was only a little damage. It's already fixed. Go wake your mother and let's be on our way."

Helma goes to her mother's bed and tells her it is time to go. Soon, they are all dressed and anxious to get outside. In the town square, the giant fire is already ablaze, consuming the carcasses of the beasts placed among the timbers before dawn. As they walk to the door, Helma asks her parents, "Did Father Yule take any bad children last night?" Her father answers, "I believe only one . . . from our street. Now, Happy Yuletide, my family. Let's go celebrate.

Jon Camp on "Storm": "...is the opening short story of The Tales of Gundrin. I have finished others, have some in development, and planning still others. All have to do with the town of Gundrin, the people (some strange) who live there, and the ever-present Mount Gundrin. It is on the mountain that the Yookers(near-humans), Greenbacks(very large spiders), and other things live. I do not wish to put it all into one story. My plan is to finish the series and then publish them as a book. Then, each story will reveal more of the town and people as the book progresses."

PERSEPHONE

Sweet Persephone!

Daughter of sorrow and abundance.

Innocent blossom plucked too soon.

Bright spring petal,

In winter's dark garden.

by Louise Webster

THE PERSONALS

Category: Men seeking something

Professional bridge burner/broken angel,

seeks bookish spinster/librarian for

cinematic romance of biblical proportion.

Me: Thirty-whatever, slender, 5'10, grey

eyes, shoulder-length blonde curly hair,

bone-white skin (seraph noir), wear

shadows if they fit. Ex-poet, ex-musician,

ex-artist, ex-assassin, looking for hardcore

redemption. You: Legal, subtle, invasive

beauty, judicious kindness,

eloquent/predatory wit, classic femme fatale

ethos/pathos. Kiss kiss, bang bang. Must

possess strong desire to be adored and

protected. In this graceless city, I have

doubtless seen you many times, both awake

and asleep, and wondered how lovely it

might be to read you stories by the light of

the midnight sun.

by Regent St. Clare

NARCISSUS

The mirror, gold flecked halo,

Reflects the light of objects in the room.

Expanding the horizon

I pass by the glass and look

Hoping to see myself more clearly

But am pulled in.

by Louise Webster