

A Sleeping Feast

by

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Prologue

At first he heard them scurrying through leaves around his body, acting as if he wasn't there. Burrowing and scraping, they busily ate-out a home for themselves. They tunnelled into his soft flesh and gnawed his bones. Inside his half-buried torso they twisted around like dogs chasing their tails. His senses were numb, but the creatures moved deep within like a swelling bowel.

He knew, but could do nothing.

He'd been aware of them throughout the winter, but now the air was warmer and his senses were awakening perhaps he could leave – get away from their shredding teeth and plump overfed bodies. He wanted to go home. He didn't want to die like this.

With tremendous effort he raised his mud-caked arm. Silver-dewed cobwebs strained then snapped releasing sparks of water. Sodden earth clung to his elbow forming a gnarly branch indistinguishable from the forest litter, and trailing ivy tied the limb to the ground. His body's leached nutrients had fed the hungry roots.

He fought until the effort exhausted him and he

collapsed. His arm settled back into the forest floor as if it had never moved.

He was held for now. He would wait for his strength to return.

Joe slid the car to a halt at the T-junction but kept the revs up and the headlights on full beam. Through the mist and glare he could make out the sign post on the opposite verge. Six miles to paradise.

Music pounded from the stereo, and he mouthed the lyrics in between sharp puffs on a joint. He appreciated the spliff his friend had pre-rolled. Spida could always be relied on to make good with the skins, and after a quick visit to his place Joe knew he'd be set up for the night.

“Coo...ool,” he sang, with each base note shaking through his seat and vibrating the cassettes and CDs in the passenger floor well.

He took a long draw and held his breath while nodding to the music. He exhaled, grasped the wheel, revved the engine, slammed the car into gear and headed towards Ravenbridge.

His girlfriend's parents were out for the night, and he was up for some fun in their double bed. He laughed. They rarely had a house to themselves, and for days he'd been imagining the games they could play. They'd get stoned off their faces. The sex would be long, fun and dirty: sucking, fucking, stroking, tying-up games and forfeits between naked jaunts to the kitchen to fend

off munchie attacks. They'd use each other's bodies as plates.

The three lamps stretched across the front bumper cut the fog like a cinema projector. He could handle it. Fog made the journey interesting, and loud music excited him. He accelerated hard from the junction and pictured himself as a rally driver in a bizarre mixture of night club and Le Mans. It was like driving through dry ice on a dance floor.

It had been a warm day, one of the warmest he could remember. His thoughts came quickly and movement was easier. Finally he was free of the binding roots.

His arms resembled felled branches of trees, waterlogged and covered in mould. The skin had cracked and split as his flesh had swollen, and the discolouration – only a hint of pink under the brown leather surface – made it difficult to tell if he was clothed. He rubbed his forearm and scraped off a layer of cheese-like substrate.

An odour of soap and damp crept from his body and followed him. The smell breached his dull senses and grew stronger. At first he thought it was the soft fragrance of his wife's perfume, and he tried to find her. But as the sun warmed his sagging flesh and stirred his turgid blood, bacteria swarmed and divided releasing the stench of decay, and he realised the scent of her perfume was the wanderings of his imagination. She was lost.

He didn't recall entering the wood – where the dark loam oozed beneath his naked feet and water squished between the remains of his toes – but by nightfall his day had become a series of snapshot memories. Flash – by a tree. Flash – lying in a ditch. Flash – staring at the sunset. Between the snapshots, he felt only a longing for home and terrible regret.

Joe took a long draw on the joint, sucked in and held his breath while shaking his head and shoulders in time to the music. He released a huge cloud of smoke in between himself and the windscreen which spread out as though the fog had found its way in. “Yes,” he shouted as the car hit a bump and rose up on its springs lifting him from the seat.

“Ooh baby-tastic. Fantastic,” nodding and shaking.

It was a great car. Paid for out of his own sweat. Not bad for a trainee plasterer.

He'd fixed it up over the last few months; added bucket seats, smaller steering wheel, re-bored the engine to gain a few CCs, alloys, new shocks. Hours of rubbing down preparing the bodywork for re-spray. It was a full time job, and he hadn't seen much of Sonia for a couple of weeks. He was getting horny.

He swerved the car across the road and leant into the corner as the car rucked against the crumbling tarmac and edged along the grass bank. He loved testing the suspension. It was solid; set up for racing. A bit uncomfortable but the bucket seats supported him, and

he liked his girl complaining at the rough ride.

Holding the car around a long bend he reached out and turned up the stereo. Still only half power. There wasn't another system like it, not on his street, and not in his town. It rocked. Twelve-inch bass speakers concealed beneath the front seats directed frequencies lower than 200 Hz into his spine. 120 Watts per-side of mid-range with a sensitivity of 104dB at 1 meter that tingled the skin. The interior was wired. Fucking excellent.

Flash – the smell and the hunger.

A numbing hunger from months without food.

Liquefying vegetables.

Now he had something to eat. A feast, laid out before him, raw meat from a carcass squashed against a tarmac tablecloth.

A thin puree of vegetables, a spoon held by a nurse was the last meal he remembered.

He forced a mouthful and bit into the cream-cheese consistency of the meat. It *was* food, he could feel it swill round his mouth, but there was no taste and his bite was indefinite, like biting beyond the point his teeth should have stopped his jaw from moving. Like biting into his own skull.

He bent down to tear off some more flesh and felt a noise. Felt it through his body, a thumping beat and roaring engine. Music and lights; he remembered being at home when his daughter danced to CDs and flashed

the lounge lights in her pretend disco.

“Easy left.” Joe called out navigation instructions as he leant into the bend with the spliff hanging from his mouth. The road narrowed and twisted downhill while overhanging trees formed a fog-lined tunnel.

“Medium right.” He dropped a gear and floored the accelerator, trying to get the back end to swing out on the wet road.

The car raced out of the curve and hit a pothole. He lurched to the right. The spliff jogged from his lips. “Shit!” He looked to his lap while brushing the blims from the front of his shirt and steering with his free hand. A sharp pain on his thigh – the joint had fallen between his legs. “Fuck.” He lifted himself from the seat and parted his legs, his head bobbing as he switched his gaze between the road and the seat. “Where’s it fucking gone?”

He remained half standing while negotiating a tight bend. The spliff had nestled between the back rest and the seat, and was beginning to burn through the vinyl. He took a swift glance at the road then reached for the burning joint.

He looked up. A black figure, frozen in the lights and framed by dazzling fog, knelt in the road beside the carcass of a badger. Like a mantis, it turned to face the oncoming car, no expression, no surprise, just piercing bright-red eyes staring back at the driver.

Terror rose from deep in Joe’s guts, twisting his

stomach and forcing open his mouth, until he screamed and stamped on the brake simultaneously. The car swerved and he wrestled with the wheel. The figure stared, unmoving, waiting for impact. “Jesus!”

The car pummelled into the figure, and its legs crumpled below the bumper. The vehicle shook, wrenching control from Joe's grasp as the body smashed into the windscreen smearing black fluid across the glass. The rear wheels swung out turning the car sideways. He fought the skid, but the car failed to respond and he panicked; his face bleached like the fog, drained of blood, and he let go of the steering wheel.

The car hit the verge, flipped and rolled up the forested embankment. Joe rocked and tumbled, his limbs battering the interior and smashing into the dashboard. The car bounced from tree to tree before coming to rest with its roof flat against the tops of the seats and its panels ripped from the chassis.

The engine roared then stopped, leaving a solid-beat bass line thumping through Joe's torn body.