

The Lamp in
The Window

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May stood at the top of the stairs. She watched the shadows of her Grandmother and Aunt Garnet cast by the lamp on the oil-spattered wall. Pulling her worn sweater around her, she stooped to sit on the top stair. It was late but she pushed back the tired longing creeping into her arms and legs. She didn't want to lie down, and she didn't want to think about last night. But she did.

Zea, her grandmother, and Aunt Garnet had left the house after dark to help husk the corn at the longhouse. Before closing the porch door they told her that if anyone came by she was to set the lamp back in the window and they would be right home. May snapped the wooden latch down to let her grandmother know she had locked the door, hesitated a few moments then leaned close to the door and listened. Satisfied that they were gone she eased a crack in the door. Opening it wider she could see the tiny glow of the cigarette Aunt Garnet had lit before the door closed. She listened and could hear the fading of their footsteps on the bare path. She knew the path would take them along its dips and curves, and up to the clearing where the longhouse stood. They lived that close.

May walked back into the kitchen and closed the door that separated the room from the porch. She leaned against the door for a few moments before deciding to check the fire in the woodstove. It was while she stoked the flames that she began to be afraid.

May had always been a little afraid of the dark. Sometimes she had to get up and go to the outhouse during the night. On the way back she could feel her body pushing itself towards the door. Often she wouldn't resist that terrible urging and she would run from the shadows, away from that unseen demon. In the morning she would feel foolish and ashamed. She never told anyone.

May pulled back the thick quilt on her Grandmother's cot, undressed and lay very still. The crackling of the wood had stopped; it would simmer until morning. There was no sound. May felt that she would be okay if she could only hear some sound. Flinging back the covers May jumped up and stood beside the woodstove. She reached for the worn poker that hung on a nail. Lifting the round, black lid she poked through the top layer of ash until the wood underneath cracked and snapped back to life. Still, she could feel herself becoming afraid, quite afraid. She realized she was afraid of dying.

A few weeks before, Zea had begun singing a soft, lifting tune as they washed their clothes on the porch. She taught May the Indian words first, then sang the song in English:

*See them fly,
See them fly,
When I die,
I, too, will fly.*

May learned the English words too and thought it sad that the song lost some of its meaning when she sang it in English. It sounded less pretty. It was at this time May realized her grandmother would die someday. And it was with fear and horror that May realized that she, too, would die. That night she had crept down the stairs long after Zea and Aunt Garnet were asleep. She sat in the rocking chair, in its deep, grey corner, and finally fell asleep before the morning.

And, last night, alone, May felt the same fear.

It came upon her like a thick, heavy blanket, pressing in from all sides, squeezing the breath from her. She let the lid fall back into place and threw the poker into the wood box. Whirling around she seized the lamp from its tiny stand and set it down in the window. She was breathing now, but it was long, drawn gasps. It was as if she had been working very hard. She stood back and watched the wick flicker within the globe. She looked past the reflection in the window pane and peered into the darkness, seeing nothing but feeling relieved. May went up the stairs and lay on her bed. She fell asleep waiting for her Grandmother and Aunt Garnet to get home.

She awoke to the sound of steps going back down the stairs and her aunt's voice.

"She's up there asleep for chrissakes. Probably just got scared." Aunt Garnet said.

She sounded angry and May knew it was because she had left the company of all the people who turned out to help at husking time. She held her breath waiting to hear what they would say.

"She's young yet," her Grandmother said.

"Dammit, we should've waited until she was asleep."

"She should know what's going on. It's good we came back."

"She's always scared about something. Hell, she gets on my nerves," Garnet said.

"Husking just started," Zea said, "there'll be more nights, people will come back tomorrow."

The furious scraping of a wooden match across a hard surface told May that Aunt Garnet had lit another cigarette.

"I'm going back for a while. No sense in wasting the night here."

Aunt Garnet had closed the door with her last words. The wooden latch snapped hard as the porch door closed and May lifted her head to look out the window. Through the cracked pane she could see a shadow pass below, pass the well beside the house and fade into the dark. She's going over to Tessie Buck's, thought May.

They drank a lot over there and May wondered if Aunt Garnet would come home later. Sometimes she stayed away for days. She remembered her mother had never come back at all. But Zea never said anything about it. If May asked her any questions she would shake her head from side to side and say in Indian, "someday their eyes will open." Then she would make herself busy and at night she would put the lamp in the window.

May was snapped out of her thoughts by the soft glow moving up the stairs. she sat up in bed and watched her own shadow grow longer and more vivid on the wall beside her. Then, Zea's head appeared as she ascended the steps, lamp in hand. It was a slow, painful climb for her. One veiny, large-knuckled hand clutched the rail as the other steadied the lamp, careful to balance the globe. A good one was hard to come by, she would often say, as she cleaned the smoke from its narrow neck. Her Grandmother placed the lamp on the floor at the top of the stairs then came and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"What was it, May?" she asked.

"There was a knock on the door but when I asked who was there no one answered," May said.

Silence.

May continued faster, "I opened the door and looked out but no one was there. It was just dark."

"What did you think it was?"

"I don't know," May said, not lifting her eyes from the bed. She waited.

"You don't want to be scared of the dark," her Grandmother said. "The dark can't hurt you."

"What about when you die? Will it get dark when you die, Grandmother?"

May recoiled from her own words. Her sudden intake of breath caused her to lean back and she looked straight into Zea's face. May absorbed every line in the old face before her as she waited, aching for her reply.

Zea hesitated. Then her Grandmother smiled, crinkling her tired, watery eyes. "I think," she began, "only if we die without noticing the light." She had hugged May with a strong squeeze of her hard, old arms and chuckled. She got up from the bed and chuckled once more as she descended the stairs. May had been puzzled, and she fell asleep thinking of her words over and over.

Now here she was again, at the top of the stairs. She still didn't really understand what her Grandmother had said. But she felt less afraid. Zea and Aunt Garnet were getting ready to go to the longhouse again. She watched the shadows fade on the wall as they moved away from the kitchen door. It was quiet for a few moments then she heard them talking on the porch. They were putting on their jackets, getting ready to leave. Then, her Grandmother's head appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

"Come on, May," she said, "get ready."