

THE HITCHHIKER IN THE WOODS

By

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## CHAPTER 1

A girl is sticking out her thumb on a desolate road late at night. You're driving on your way to your friend's house. It's late and you're tired. You're going to sleep over at your friend's home. It's the first time you've visited, you'll see your friend since he moved out of his old home. In fact you have been looking forward to it for some time, now. It's been too long since you saw your friend.

This area is almost famous for drivers getting lost, and you've thoroughly confirmed that for yourself tonight. Several times the last hour you've taken the wrong turn, driven back to familiar territory, and started all over again. You'll retire early tonight and sleep soundly. And it's late. And the whole scene looks a little... odd to you. But you want to help the girl, and she's not likely to encounter other cars this evening. It is late, after all.

So you stop and she gets in, in the passenger seat beside you. The fog and the cold seem to enter with her.

– Thank god, you drove by, she says aloud, grinning insanely happy. – You're the first car I've seen for ages.

– It almost seems like fate, doesn't it? You counter lightly.

She's pushing herself at you and you're wondering if she's gonna kiss you in her gratitude, but she doesn't and pulls away quite fast, probably a bit taken back with her own exuberance.

She pulls her legs into the car and closes the door. The whisper of the wind between the trees is muted, but you can yet hear it, hear it all, as the huge forest continues to surround the narrow stretch of road.

The car engine is muted. The sounds coming from it, coming from it through the entire drive have caused you to suspect there are some irregularities somewhere, but the car's performance hasn't really shown signs of abating, so you keep driving.

The whispers from the forest keep echoing in your ears.

– It has turned quite cold, hasn't it? You say, shaking slightly.

– Yes, she agrees. – I've never felt so cold in my entire life.

You're turning on the heater. Even if it's summer outside. And almost immediately you have to check it, to see if you really turned it on. You did, and you can feel the warm air touching the skin of your fingers. But this is close to the vent. Ten, fifteen centimeters away, and the heat seems to dissolve into a hole in the very air.

– So, how did you happen to end up out here? You ask lightly. – There can't be a house for miles in these parts.

– There... was a cab, she says. – It... disappeared.

What an odd phrase. You're wrinkling your brow in sudden deep thought. Wouldn't the correct be «drove off», or something?

Shrugging, you stop thinking about it. Or try to.

– I was out here with friends, she suddenly bursts out, – but they disappeared, too. I was Alone.

– Listen, you say casually, – I can't imagine what has happened here tonight, but it must have been pretty awful for you. Can I interest you in a cup of tea or something? I'm on my way to a friend of mine, he lives nearby, and I can drive you home afterwards?

– I live with my father, she said slowly. – Driving me home sounds fine, tea... sounds fine. Thank you!

She looks at you with a grateful look in her eyes, those great almond eyes.

There is a hill on the left hand, as you can see the first signs of civilization. The first signs of life, beyond the forest, beyond the road. There is a house on that hill. The moon is just about visible among the storm clouds, just above the roof.

– That's my house, the girl says happily.

You drive into town. You finally reach your destination. As you suspected no pub or inn is open at this time and hour and you set course to your friend's house. You notice that the lights are on, are still on, and draw deep breaths of relief. Your friend has been very patient. You hope you can make it up to him someday.

The courtyard is lit. Even so, you still almost miss it. The fog is both in the air and your eyes. You're tired. It's been a long drive.

Your friend meets you in the yard. He's not wearing a jacket, a fact you find strange. It's after all not the hottest of summer nights. Oh, well, he's not planning on spending any extended time out here tonight, and neither are you.

– Nice drive, eh... He's grinning at you.

– An excellent drive, you're returning the grin. – I want to do it every night.

– Well, I'm just glad I can invite you in, finally.

You shake hands.

– I met a girl tonight; I've invited her to tea. I hope it's all right.

Your friend is nodding. It's okay. Of course it is.

He leads the way inside. You stop a bit, to allow the girl to enter before you. The house' warmth is embracing you all. Inside the living room the fire is burning in the hearth, fog is floating in the dry air.

– You're gonna love this, you say loud. – I brought a mobile phone with me. Since I haven't been able to contact you the last day or so, I feared all your lines are acting up.

– Nothing wrong with our phones, but there has been a problem calling outside the village.

The tea is boiling hot. You sit in a deep chair, taking the first sip. Even if you can hear the distinct sound of both the wind and the rain outside the warmth of the house is starting to sink in.

– It sure is wet and windy outside, isn't it?

– It's been like that for some time now, your friend shrugs.

– The house sure is quite solidly built, you say impressed. – Trees are bending outside and it's hardly affecting it at all.

– I'm glad you came, your friend says. – You're the first from the old bunch to visit me.

– I'm the first? You cry out excitedly. – I thought I was fourth or fifth or something.

– You're the first to visit me here, he says with a strange look on his face.

The fireplace casts its glow all over the living room. You still feel the dreaded fog from the car and outside, but now it's mixed with the heat torching your limbs. Your friend smiles.

– So you finally bought a cell phone, huh?

– I told you, you scowl at him. – It was a matter of circumstance. I had to make sure I could call out of here.

The girl sits in her chair, smiling at you. She's not saying much. Not so strange really. After spending most of a chilly, wet evening walking a long walk along the road, it's not so strange that she's somewhat content to just enjoy the heat of the fire, of other people's company.

– We hardly ever get visitors anymore, she says.

– But you're not really backward these days, are you?

– Backward? Your friend is shaking his head. – No, not at all! This is a modern village, but we do not get many visitors here anymore.

– It is kinda modern, the girl says in a husky voice. – We've got computers, the latest communication technology, the works, but it's still not fully the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

– You mean the 21<sup>st</sup> century, of course, you're chiding.

– Of course, the girl replies.

– Of course, your friend replies, a bit stiff.

You lean a bit back in your chair, enjoying the conversation.

– It's all about appearances anyway, isn't it? The human brain is an amazing instrument. It can create any reality we would want, and help us avoid the more unpleasant aspects of it.

– I don't think instrument is quite the right word, the girl smiles to you, – but I basically agree with the sentiment.

Your friend says nothing.

– You know how it is, right? You continue eagerly. – We're inventing our own reality all the time. We're pretending we're not strangers to the world, pretending we're not stumbling on, in a semblance of walk.

– Says the man, pouring on his version of reality, your friend says mockingly mocking.

And you manage a sitting bow.

– Don't we all? the girl says.

There is much, much laughter.

– And the roads around here stink, the girl says.

– The roads stink, you agree vehemently. – They give new meaning to the word «bumpy».

– It's just a temporary thing, your friend insists. – The Storm turned some stones, that's all.

And the storm continues to pick up outside. But good food, good wine and the safety of the thick walls, the joy of good company, are leading you to enjoy the evening regardless.

And the evening moves on.

There's music. Your friend has this incredible elaborate system built into the walls, something he had always wanted, but couldn't afford.

– Music, a fine new house and all. Your arms are indicating your pleasant surroundings. – Did you win in the lottery or something?

– I wanted to get away from all that, you know that, your friend replies. – Sometimes everything is better with less, that's all. Focus... is turned inwards, towards what really matters.

A draft strokes your back... Or is that down your spine? You're having another sip of wine. This is just your second glass and you're not planning on having more. This is nothing of the usual drinking contest party, but a pleasant evening with friends. The wine is burning pleasantly in your belly, that's all.

– Time sure is flying, you say. – I thought about driving down here last year, or even the year before that. I sensed an urgency in your voice this time around, though, an urgency I also felt in myself. Funny, huh?

– It is urgent, your friend says.

– Does everyone get so weird after living here just a few years, you're jokingly asking the girl.

– This is nothing. You should see the rest of the people here. They're truly nuts.

Did the girl say that, or your friend?

– The Storm is really shaking things up tonight, she says. – Moving the Earth, Changing Reality itself.

– I've never really thought about it that way, you state in a reflecting manner.

– What have you never thought about? your friend asks in a strange manner.

– About storms as a metaphor for disturbances in our concept of Reality, you're saying to your evidently absentminded friend. – I mean, nothing really changes during a storm, does it? Trees and houses are roughed up a bit, but then everything returns to normal. Normality is obviously the stable course of events.

Your friend looks at you with a twinkle in his eyes.

– Didn't some scientist... Heisenberg, wasn't it, state, with his uncertainty principle, that it was the other way around, that reality is really quite unstable, that it's an accident waiting to happen?

Your friend looks downright weird then.

– Didn't he... also state that «God isn't playing dice with the universe»?

– Nope. The girl is shaking her head. – That was Einstein. I believe Heisenberg was more realistic...

– That was Einstein, your friend confirms quite unnecessary.

The tea tastes good. It's a different kind of tea, one you can't remember having tasted before. You want to ask your host, your friend, what brand it is, but you don't. The opportunity never seems to present itself. You're quite engaged in the conversation, in your company, the friend and the girl. Engaged in ways you could hardly imagine until tonight.

It isn't just a matter of enjoying the curve of the girl's breasts, the feral sensuality of her being.

It goes far beyond that.

You're forced to excuse yourself and go to the bathroom.

– Too much tea, you joke.

There's not much of an ongoing conversation while you're away. You're looking out from the bathroom while peeing, and your friend and the girl just sit there, enjoying their tea. Well, perhaps they do not know each other, after all. The village isn't that small and your friend hasn't stayed here that long, and they're of an entirely different age group. You, yourself, are probably the glue tying them to each other, keeping the conversation, the party going.

You wash your hands afterwards, cleaning the clean fluid from your skin. There is a mirror above the sink. Looking into it, at your own mirror image, is giving you a strange feeling inside. It's as if... you can't see yourself in the mirror. You're shaking your head, returning to the party in the living room.

The Storm shakes the house then, making it screech and howl. The Storm or the house? you're asking yourself.

– Ouch! you exclaim. The two others are not forthcoming in their comments.

Sometimes you feel right at home here, more at home than anywhere else, ever before. And then there are moments like this, with quite an awkward silence.

– I'd like to go home, now, please. You're drowning in the layer upon layer of her eyes, her presence.

– Of course, you nod.

– Of course what? the man in the sofa ask.

A strange girl, a strange place. Layers upon layers of complexity. You kinda like it.

– I have to take a drive, you tell your friend. – I'll be back shortly.

Your friend nods.

– That's quite okay. What about a late dinner when you return?

– A splendid suggestion, you exclaim. – Let's burn the midnight oil, shall we?

There's laughter. There's an echo, but there's still laughter.

Outside you're surprised by the fact that there is hardly any wind. Not at all the calamity you were expecting after spending a considerable amount of time between shaking walls and hearing the howling of something very

much resembling a Storm. You look at the girl. She doesn't look surprised, but is merely giving you her sweet expectant smile.

Even the hood of your car is dry. You study the ground, and realize that there is no sign of rain. There is no sign that it has been raining the last few hours. The dust rises easily from the ground. It isn't wet.

– Nice weather, isn't it? She reveals her pearly white, flawless teeth.

– I've seen worse. You give her your best smile in return, in an attempt to mask your unease.

The seat in the car is dry and pleasant, very pleasant. Even compared to the deep sofa and seats in your friend's house. The steering wheel is also almost awkwardly solid. The roar from the engine seemingly deafening. You drive through the gate, entering the main street. That's when you notice it...

The moisture in the air. The cold breath from somewhere, chilling you to the bone.

– It's the car, the fucking car. It's been acting up for some time now. At least since...

– Perhaps you should consider buying a new one.

– It's a rental. Do you know a place where I may rent another in this town?

She looks hurt. You want to apologize, but your throat feels constricted and not a word escapes the confines of your mind.

The town is quite small, just a few blocks really, a typical village. But the drive seems to take some time anyway. The girl's home is on the other side of town, a few hundred meters from the «tighter» cluster of houses, but still... You shake your head and drive it from your mind.

It's a nice little «town», a village hidden away in the countryside and in the woods. The trees are quite close to most of houses, like the houses are close to any road, as the trees, the forest itself seem to close in on you. It feels quite unnerving really, to one born and bred in a big city.

– The trees are nice, are they not?

The girl speaks up with a bright, energetic voice. Almost sensual in its deep, singing tone.

Now, that is an odd phrase, if you have ever heard one. A sight of a forest... or the sight of a tree, may be deemed nice, not the trees themselves. Trees weren't «nice» or anything, they didn't have a *personality*... did they?

– You have quite a liking for this place, haven't you? you're pondering.

– What are you saying? She smiles at you.

– I mean, one thing is to move to a place like this, like my friend did, being fed up with life in the fast lane. But a... a younger person like yourself will usually want to leave it behind, at least for a number of years. You must really be attached to the place since you're evidently not even considering it.

– Sure, she says unfazed, – it's nice here.

*She doesn't seem to mind the chill either. Talk about indomitable spirit of youth.*

You reflect, bringing one hand tight to the other, attempting to rub the stiffness and the cold out of them both. Steering with one hand is easy enough. By habit you keep looking behind you, to see if there are impatient drivers there, who want you to increase your speed, making their point with the horn and a lot of obscene gestures. But there isn't likely to be any crowd of them in these parts.

Is there?

As you stop the car, there seem to be something akin to an aurora borealis, a northern light, hanging over the house on the hill. But once you actually look at it, there is nothing, except the night and the trees and the house. You realize you've been here before, a few hours ago, asking the old man in the house for directions.

– You know, I was here a couple of hours ago, you laugh, – asking your father for directions. Talk about driving in circles...

You want to go outside and open the door for the girl, but before you've managed to completely stop the car, she has opened the door and left the car. Quiet as a shadow, fast as the wind.

– Thank you, thank you, she says with her bright smile. – You're a true lifesaver. I'll see you around, okay?

– Sure, you say, a bit out of breath. – Anytime.

You see her walk safely to the house, before driving off.

You return to your destination, driving the same, horrible, bumpy road. The birds can be heard singing in the trees. And you stop for a moment. Not the car, but your train of thoughts. Did you actually hear the birds sing before? Had the road been bumpy?

It's a nice little town or township this. White walls, one house, one home, not more than two floors. A nice place to settle down, if that is one's desire. And bumpy roads, like most of the more unsavory aspects of village lifestyle, are probably something that will grow on a person.

There aren't any people outside this evening, but that's hardly surprising either, with this weather.

You look out through the windshield. The weather isn't so bad really, almost quiet and dry, compared to the hairy impression one gets while being inside a house. Another village peculiarity, you gather. Villages are very quiet compared to big cities. Though, while nature rears its head, it tends to be experienced (by visitors) as worse than it actually is.

Your new car behaves... strangely tonight. The noise from the engine makes it sound as if it's really striving. And on flat ground to boot.

You shake your head and keep on driving.

Just a few turns and you're there. Your friend's picturesque and truly nice home is seen in a cold, silver-blue glow in the moonlight. Translucent and strangely inviting.

You leave the car as it is, unlocked. Your friend is waiting in the hallway. The door is open. You walk inside. Your old friend closes the door behind you.



– Oh, it’s just you...

– Yes, for now, you reply, looking closer at the other man. Was he expecting other dinner guests as well?

The table is set for three. Glasses, forks, knives, plates in three sets are shining at you. The air seems even more smoke-filled than earlier. There is no discomfort.

The meal starts a bit apprehensive, but the hot food and drinks are loosening tongues fast enough. At least yours. The man you haven’t seen for years, is still behaving a bit pulled back, a bit strange, compared to how you remember him.

But that isn’t really strange, is it? Absence does that to a friendship. Words are haltingly begun and spoken, as the mind is looking for rusty phrases and forlorn memories.

You give each other a toast. The sound of the two glasses clinking is strangely muted in the smoke-filled room, the hazy air.

– I do believe there’s logic in the universe, you state eagerly, after a sip or two. – It’s just quite different from the one we usually imagine. Layer upon layer of complexity for the inquisitive mind to peel away.

Your friend looks downright weird then.

– Is something going on in this town? you ask casually.

– What do you mean? Your friend is replying.

– I mean, you laugh, – is something special happening these days?

– Not that I’m aware of, your friend laughs. – I told you nothing ever happens in this town. If you’re looking for action, you’ve come to the wrong place.

You swallow a huge sip...

There’s a loud crack outside, as if something is hitting the wall. The house shakes violently. You look at your friend. He isn’t looking overly worried. You slightly brace yourself, awaiting a possibly more devastating attack at the house.

– Cheers, your friend says aloud, lifting his glass.

The two glasses meet with a sound of two glasses meeting. You drink some more. You relax.

There isn’t really a storm outside. You know that. You’ve been outside. The wind occasionally gains strength a bit (more than a bit), that’s all. One second the wind is there, the other second there isn’t any. And the peace and quiet of the village is accentuated... until the next gale of a wind is rocks the ground, rocks the village.

Not like any wind you’ve ever seen, but a wind nonetheless.

And yes, you know that you can’t really see the wind, only the results of it. Like you can’t hear the rippling in a pond, after a rock has hit its surface. And you might not have been present while the actual stone hit the surface, but you may still observe and be caught in the effects.

Food is hot, mixing with the liquor, causing an explosive mix in your stomach.

And you can sense it. You can sense it all around you.

There is a tingling, suddenly, gone before you're really noticing it. Looking at your skin, you see no gooseflesh, no rising hairs and you're no longer sure what you felt an instant ago.

– Cheers, your friend exclaims cheerfully.

– Cheeeers, you exclaim at least as cheerfully.

Two glasses meet and part. The sound is lingering in the room, as an echo, a resonance.

– So what have you been up to, since you moved, you're asking.

– Just living, you know. Life is all in all pretty quiet down here.

– You're right, you agree. – A man could really learn to appreciate it.

That weird look again. You decide it must be a trick of the light. The light is funny in here.

A loud whine from the oven, signifying more food soon to be available on the table. So convenient a timing.

You swear you can smell cameras in here...

Your friend comes sliding with the bowl of shrimp in one hand, a new bottle of wine in the other.

– Shrimp, you're saying floored. – And Margeux '69, too. You're evidently recalling all my favorites. Me? I can't recall your memory being that good.

– It's the countryside air, your friend exclaims cheerfully.

He wants me to stay, you think. That must be it. What other explanation can there be?

Calm sets in the house once more. There is the wind outside and the talk and fun shared between two old friends, but there is silence. Quiet perhaps, but no calm. The storm is already raging.

– It can be a bit lonely here, he says suddenly. – The villagers are nice people, but they're not like having a bunch of old friends around.

– Hardly a bunch, you hear yourself saying. – Why didn't you invite the bunch by the way?

– I did, he says, sobering a bit. – The entire bunch. You were the only who replied.

Now, *that* is odd. You want to give voice to your concern, but find that you can't quite find the words.

– That's hard to comprehend. You did get replies, didn't you, their reasons for not attending?

– No. He shakes his head. – Not a word.

It's hot in here. Not so strange that. The fireplace seems to extend its flames ever further out in the room, its tongues stretching, touching the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the furniture. You can feel it close to you, like a living thing. It's at least five steps to the fireplace from where you are sitting... or so it seems.

A loud wail makes you jump in your chair, a whisper in the fog of suffering and torment.

– What was THAT? You exclaim, almost shout.

– The mist creates funny sounds around here, your friend says unfazed.

Or so it seems.

– It sounded human, man. Didn't you *hear* it?

– You'll get used to it.

Your friend says unfazed.

Later. It has calmed down a bit outside. Inside there's a pleasant, tempered atmosphere. The food is good. You taste the fluid in your mouth. The wine is good. In fact you can't remember having a more tasty meal for some time. If ever. You can't remember your friend being such a good cook either, but you let it slide. It is your friend sitting there. His eyes, his face, his ever so pale complexion. You wonder if there is ever sunshine down here. Perhaps every evening, also during the summer, as the sun sets behind the hills, and the heat of the day dissipates, moisture is created, lots of moisture in the interim between day and night, and the fog is rising from the wet moors. And it might stay during the next day, and the next, until summer is done, and autumn and darkness envelope the land and the village.

There are the moors, the wet moors, where fog rises and creates strange shapes, like reality itself is forming there in the afternoon air. You saw them earlier today, from the road. For each opening in the forest, where trees were scarce, there was a moor.

– Devon has got nothing on this place, you mumble.

– I didn't quite catch that, your friend says.

You raise your head, speaking up a bit.

– I'm willing to bet that Sir Arthur Canon Doyle's inspiration for «The Hound of Baskerville» didn't come from him traveling in Devonshire, you say, a bit pointedly. – But from this place. He just changed the setting or the names, for one reason or another. Writers do that.

– Or perhaps the story came to him in a dream. Your friend shrugs. – It was a damn good story, anyway, wasn't it?

– You know... you lean forward a bit, suddenly quite eager. – Want to know what I think? I think he really met a demon dog, but was too afraid, too shaken after the experience, to write the truth about it.

– Or he was afraid they wouldn't believe him or worse, that he would be the laughing stock of everybody.

Your old friend says, seemingly quite sober.

– You know, you say, squinting your eye slightly. – For just a moment there, you seemed quite sober. But that, as they say...

– IS QUITE IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTEMPLATE, they complete in unison.

The sofa. It's like you're floating on it. But you get that sometimes, during your most wild drinking evenings. You've often reflected upon the fact that during many such an evening, your feet seem to stay higher than your head most of the time. Your head points at the floor, your feet at the ceiling.

– The value of contemplative moments like this, you're staring at your glass, – should never be underestimated.

– I understand what you mean, the man on the other side of the table says. – I understand it very well. Don't think I don't.

– I'm not, you say, looking serious and serene. – I don't doubt that at all.

*Do I?*

Your friend looks at his watch again. Who is he waiting for, this late?

Something keeps gnawing at your subconscious, but you can't for the life of you call it forth and remember. It can't be anything important, can it? This is a strange village, true, but didn't you expect that? There is a question you won't ask, and just the thought of it is making you afraid. You can hear the giants knocking at the door and the walls are crumbling.

– Cheers, you salute again, raising your glass.

– Cheers. The man on the sofa clinks his glass against yours, and again you hear the echo resonate through the room.

You sit on the sofa, looking at the man on the chair across the table. There is frequent movement as you and your friend trade off the duty of going to the reserve and picking up new bottles.

– There are considerations I use to reflect over at times like these, you say a bit mumbled. – While ingesting alcohol the body turns numb and also certain areas of the brain are more or less paralyzed... But there are areas of the brain hardly affected at all... or that even work better.

– It's said about alcohol, as about many narcotics, that it's a portal to the subconscious, your friend says, speaking with evident difficulty.

You keep nodding in solemn agreement, even if you're not quite certain what you're in agreement about. During the evening you've developed quite a need for looking over your shoulder. You do that again at this time. As with the hundredth times you've done so earlier, there is nothing there.

At least you don't see anything. The cold trickle down your spine, however, isn't imaginary.

– Something isn't right here, you're mumbling

– Well... it isn't *perfect* if that's what you're insinuating, your friend laughs, – but compared to other places... it's a rather nice resort.

– Last resort. You're laughing, too. – But except for that it's quite excellent.

You're looking under your chair. There's nothing there.

The road to the toilet is a rather strenuous one. You get there in time, though. You miss at your first attempt at hitting the closet, but then you hear the clear sound of the waterfall flowing in the bowl. There's a lot of humidity in here. You can hardly see yourself in the mirror because of all the steam. One attempt to clean the glass with your hand is a failure. Repeated attempts are all failures. You clean your hands with cold water,

drying them with the soft, pleasant towel. The towel does the job. You can finally see your mirror image, take a good look at your bloated face, a look distorted through a more than shaky vision.

– Your bathroom has at least one ruptured pipe somewhere, you inform your friend upon your return to the living room.

– Yeah, believe me, I've noticed. Your friend shakes his head. – I've been chasing the plumber for days, but so far he has managed to avoid me.

– It wasn't like this earlier tonight, though...

– It is behaving rather unpredictable. Sometimes during the last few days I've got the feeling that it's sentient and just playing tricks on me.

You fall back onto your chair and grabbing, raising your glass.

– Here is to sentient bathrooms.

– Cheers.

Two glasses are once more connected over the table. The sound is as muted as ever.

The two men drink, emptying their glasses.

– Christ, you exclaim. – That one hit several spots. In fact, I'll bet it hit an entire field of spots...

They have another laughter riot.

Room starts spinning. Your head falls back, and you're half sitting, half leaning back, staring at the ceiling. There's a lamp hanging from the ceiling. It seems to very, very high up. You're wrinkling the skin of your forehead. There are circles around the lamp, black concentric circles, spinning round and round and round...

You're stretched out on the sofa. Your friend still sits upright in the chair.

– I find your endurance pretty darn impressive, you're virtually shouting across the room, to your far away friend. – I mean... I find it annoying, but still darn impressive.

Your friend sits close to you. You can easily see the wrinkles on his forehead as he's concentrating, concentrating about looking at his glass and holding it steady.

– Alcohol, you know, is strange stuff, he says.

He holds his glass a bit unbalanced. No fluid decorates the table yet.

– Hi! you exclaim and point somewhere with your finger. – Didn't you have a full glass?

– One can drink a lot and not really get drunk. He leans further over the table. – Did you, by any chance, read about the double blind laboratory sessions, where one half got served alcohol and the remaining half lemonade or something?

– Sure. By now you're wrinkling the skin of your forehead, too. – Both groups were told that they were served drinks with alcohol, but the group that wasn't, the control group, got more drunk than the group who was.

– Life is strange, your friend nods.

You sit on the chair, studying your hands, mumbling.

– Was... wasn't... was... he he

You look down in your glass. There's nothing there.

– Something is not RIGHT here, you shout exasperated, hitting the table with your fist. – I've felt it in my gut since I got here... early this evening.

No whiskey is spilled. Not a drop decorates the table.

– Your gut isn't feeling much of anything at this moment, the man across the table grins.

The man sitting either on the couch or on the chair.

– He he, you grin.

– There's something wrong here, you whimper. – I can feel it in my gut.

And the wind is laughing its heart out outside.

You rise from the chair (or from the couch), standing on your two feet. Or so it seems. A man stands by the window, looking out. You can see the porch and the lawn outside. The man may be you.

But you're not sure.

– I hate to be the one pointing it out, your friend says, – but it's getting late.

– Late? you say.

– You spoke of a girl. She's late isn't she?

You turn towards your friend. Suddenly you feel damn sober and all the alcohol you may have ingested is pushed in painful ways out through your skin.

– What are you talking about? The girl was with me when I arrived and left after a while. There isn't more than one.

The fog is drifting into the room; condensing from the smoke and humidity inside, drifting in from the outside, through keyholes and windows not open.

*This is it. Whatever it is.*

You realize you have been waiting for something all evening. The shock hits you unexpectedly and cruel.

You're sweating. You're not hot anymore, but you're sweating.

– How... did she look like? Your friend finally speaks, but what is he *saying*?

– She's young, blonde, quite pale, tall, full lips, full everything... Why are you even asking me this? You saw her well enough yourself, didn't you? She even knew you, for god's sake.

– Jesus, your friend cries. – You've seen the Ghost.

You keep staring at him. He's dead serious.

– It's a prank, right? Tell me it's a prank.

You've always suspected that people in the countryside were half crazy, but this is a bit too much.

– I didn't see her, he tells you somberly.

– B-but... you were *talking*.

But had they really been talking? You attempt to reach back, through the fog of time. You recall now, how they both replied to you, how they both spoke as if the other wasn't there.

You rush to the bathroom, you rush outside, starting the car. You stare at yourself in the mirror.

And in your mind you're revisiting the house on the hill. You see what your mind didn't or couldn't acknowledge before: The girl walking up to the house and entering it. But she doesn't open the door... she's just walks straight through it.

You run up the slope to the door. A man, her father comes out.

The whispers from the forest echo in your mind.

You almost drive off the road several times as you race back to the house on the hill. The sunken old man stands on his porch, and starts talking the moment you jump out of your car.

– I have been waiting for you, he says. – A runaway driver ran down my daughter last fall. She's been following drivers back here ever since.

You're backing off, backing off rapidly, without really seeing where you're heading.

There is fog everywhere, and you can hardly find your way, find your car.

You experience the drive back as even more unreal. Did that drive ever take place?

The bathroom doesn't feel even remotely comforting now. Water keeps flooding your face, as your hands move up and down, up and down, from the sink. The water turns into mist the moment it's released to air.

You look at yourself in the mirror, the sweaty face, the dilated pupils, the shaking lips. And you know, you know, beyond words, that this is not the end. And all the lights, all the bright spots in the small room can't keep the darkness away.