Seventy-Seven Clocks

Christopher Fowler

I

LIGHTS OUT

She recognized the symptoms at once.

The stipple of sweat in the small of her back. Ice-heat prickling her forehead. Skittering panic in the pit of her stomach. As she walked faster, she thought, This is absurd, it can't harm me. But beneath her mind's voice ran another, dark and urgent. It's not the night, but what waits in it.

The sun had barely set, but the road ahead was indistinct in the fading light. She refused to consider what might be out there. The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman, hissed the voice, a phrase recalled from her schooldays. She had no intention of meeting the prince this evening, and quickened her pace, not daring to look back. The clouds of night opened like ink blossoming in water, threatening to overtake her. Blackbirds raggedly skirted the trees, taking measure of the rising wind.

For as long as she could remember, Sam Gates had been terrified of the dark. The cause of this nyctophobia was beyond the reach of recollection: perhaps some early trauma at the top of the stairs. Her mother accused her of having an overactive imagination; she made it sound like a harmful thing. Others would have seen misted fields on either side of the road, bare elm trees blurring in the dusk. Sam saw demons swarming.

She tried to read her watch, but it was too dark to see the face. Damn Nicholas and his country weekend, she thought. If he'd shown some warning sign of his intentions, she would never have come in the first place. The man should have been wearing a red toggle, Pull To Inflate Ego, like a lifejacket. His personality had changed the moment he'd realized that she wasn't going to bed with him.

Now it was almost dark, and she was stuck in the deserted Kent countryside on a Sunday night, without a car, in the freezing cold, with an irrational dread nipping at her, goading her into a trot. She was a town girl, used to city lights and cars and sirens and people. She wanted to hear Radio Caroline on her transistor. Instead, it was so quiet you could hear a cow break wind five miles away. Where the hell was everybody?

She thought back over the weekend, and the mistake she had made in accepting his invitation. On Saturday morning they had 'motored down to

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the lodge' - his Leslie Phillips expression, as if they were living in the fifties - in the red MG that kept stalling, its roof folded back to admit the freezing country air.

The 'lodge', a damp Victorian monstrosity situated on the far side of Detling, had been designed in such a way that the watery warmth of the winter sun was excluded from it through every phase of the earth's rotation. The ground floor was surrounded by tall wet nettles, the brickwork obscured by fifty types of reeking brown fungus. The rooms were virtually devoid of furniture. There was no central heating. Nicholas's family might have breeding, but they obviously had no money. The upkeep of such property, he'd explained, was staggering, and his parents preferred to stay in their Knightsbridge flat.

It didn't take her long to realize that Nicholas used the empty house for sex. One look at the bedrooms was all she needed to know. Adult magazines, wine bottles, mirrors and candles, a lad's pathetic idea of what would excite women. The blinds were drawn tight in all the upper rooms, and probably remained so throughout the year.

Her partner's dinner conversation had consisted of college tales laden with sexual innuendo. He was a different man on his home ground, all smirk and swagger, and she hated it. It was as if she had ceased to be his friend, and had become his quarry. The second time he brushed her breast while reaching for the Chianti, Sam had announced that she was going to bed. No amount of persuasion could keep her from the stairs.

She'd spent a sleepless night barricaded into her room, wearily listening to his pleas and insults through the door.

She had never looked forward to dawn so much in her life. Rising at the earliest opportunity, she had listened to the farming forecasts of incoming rain while frying herself bacon. Shortly after ten Nicholas had appeared in his dressing gown. The blackness of his mood barely allowed him to acknowledge her presence. The rest of the morning passed in gelid silence. Denied his conquest, Nicholas had regressed to a sullen schoolboy.

Her uppermost concern had been the problem of getting home. Trouble with the car - beneath which he passed most of the afternoon - prevented Nicholas from running her to the station. Typically, there was no cab service operating in the area. Sam found herself left alone to wander the rooms of the old farmhouse. As she examined the shelves of discoloured paperbacks, she grew more bored and upset. Finally she had collected her overnight bag and struck out across the field in the direction of the main road.

She would have been happy never to see him again, but he would be there the next morning, at work. They even shared the same damned counter. Well judged, she thought. You really know how to pick them.

She pushed the auburn fringe from her eyes and studied the dim road, hoping to see a light, but there was nothing. No rising moon. The darkness was nearly complete. The thought punched the air from her chest.

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She began to run along the narrow lane as the first drops fell. The downpour reduced her vision further, adding to her deepening panic. Bare branches entwined overhead like the spiny legs of insects. The trees and hedgerows were filled with scampering black imps that dropped with the rain and tried to catch her, but she ran on, hugging the curve in the road.

The dark drew forth stalking men. They lay in wait for her, appearing in clumps of wet leaves, unfolding their fingers like scythes. They could not survive in London, where there was always light, but here in the black woods and meadows they could pursue their pleasures without restraint . . .

Then she saw the light of the telephone box.

A red one, familiar as an old friend, with rectangular windows and directories and a buttery lightbulb that glowed through the torrent. Smothering her crawling fears, she concentrated on the sanctuary ahead. She wrenched back the door on its leather straps and threw herself inside.

Relief, afforded by the single bare lightbulb, washed over her, and she sank to her knees, filling the booth with angry sobs, furious at her own weakness. Everything had gone wrong. She had intended to use the weekend as a protest. Instead of attending some horrible charity dinner at Claridges with her parents, instead of keeping an appointment with her therapist, she had taken off for a weekend with a man she barely knew. She might even have had sex with Nicholas if he'd proved to be a halfway-decent human being. She'd wanted to show everyone that she had a mind of her own, but even carrying out this simple task had been beyond her.

As the rain pounded the roof, she drew the knees of her fringed jeans up beneath her chin and cried, crouching low in the fetid booth, protected from surrounding blackness as hostile as the surface of an alien planet.

She remained trapped in the haven of light, not daring to move, until a passing motorist rescued her over two hours later.

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