

Bad Moon Rising

Sheila Quigley

1

The girl's long dark ponytail swishes from side to side as she struts along the Broadway. Her white high heels make a loud tapping noise in the deserted street, scattering the tiny night creatures that infest every human habitation.

Scantily clad, in a short red top and even shorter black skirt, she shivers as she crosses the road and heads towards St Michael and All Angels church. The church has towered over Houghton-le-Spring since the thirteenth century, but there is evidence of an even earlier church on the site. On a moonless night like tonight it harbours many dark corners.

It's two o' clock in the morning. It's early October and winter's chill has arrived with a vengeance. There's frost on the ground but something special in the air because Houghton Feast is just a week away, and for many the celebrations have started early.

The girl stumbles slightly, having left the nightclub with more than one vodka under her belt, but she rights herself, and starts to walk a bit faster. She'd had two or three offers of an escort from the local studs but had announced to all her intention of going home alone. Proclaiming loudly that she'd had enough of men. Bastards, the fucking lot of them.

She loves Houghton Feast though. As her nan tells her every year, it's been celebrated in Houghton since the middle ages, and was established as a feast of dedication to the church. By custom it takes place on the nearest Friday to October tenth, when the lights are switched on by the Mayor of Sunderland and the locals are treated to a tattoo, complete with bagpipes, after which the fairground opens. On the Monday after a weekend of celebrations a huge ox is roasted in the rectory field which lies between the rectory and the police station.

Copyright © 2005 Sheila Quigley
Published by Arrow

But there's more to it than that: the feast, the tattoo and the fair may be the official story but everyone knows Feast time is a chance to let go, to go wild, to let off steam. It's like a get-out-of-jail-free card letting you off the hook for things you've wanted to do but not dared all year round. For most of this week and at the oddest hours imaginable, the fairground travellers have been pulling onto the field and the excitement is building. She can almost taste it.

Feeling a sudden cold breeze she rubs her bare arms, but the vodka is a good insulator and will keep her warm enough, for the moment. She heads for the almshouses that lie directly behind the church just as a huge truck with rearing wildeyed carousel horses painted on the side hurtles through the Broadway. A minute earlier and the driver would have hit her. The horses would have ended up on their heads with blood on their hooves. Shivering, she walks faster still.

To the right of the almshouses, the stone steps will lead her to the bridge over the dual carriageway, then on up to Hall Lane where she lives with her two-year-old son, Dillon. Dillon will be fast asleep - just as well, because the babysitter is probably stoned out of her mind. She grumbles to herself about the fiver she'll have to hand over for having Dillon minded, especially since she hates that cheeky twat Simone.

Fancy fucking name for a cheap tart. But she'd been the only one available on short notice and after five days and nights cooped up with Dillon, she'd been desperate to get out.

Winter nips at her exposed shoulders, breathing down the nape of her neck, and she wraps her arms around her body. The cold air should be sobering her up but instead it seems to have the opposite effect and in a fit of vodka-fuelled animation she starts to sing, her voice - poor even when she's sober - sounding remarkably like that of the black cat which streaks across the path behind her.

The cat is not the only warm-blooded body behind her tonight, but she hears nothing above her wailing and the rhythmic tap of her shoes. When the fingers creep round her throat, she's still singing . . . But only for a moment.

Too late, realisation pierces the alcoholic fog. The hard rough fingers tighten their grip, digging with relentless cruelty into the soft delicate flesh.

She's struggling now. Fighting for her life.

The heel of her left shoe snaps, her ankle turns but her brain, struggling for oxygen, does not register the pain.

The cat sits on the fallen gravestone of some eighteenthcentury industrialist beside the path, watching with the disinterested air cats save for humans, as she grows weaker and weaker and slides quietly to the ground, his hands still at her throat in a deadly embrace.

Copyright © 2005 Sheila Quigley

She manages one quiet, pathetic little cry into the dark as the cat, unconcerned, turns tail to hunt the mice foraging for food in the almshouses' bin.

So easy she slips into death, and how peaceful she looks. The last thing she sees in her mind's eye is the smiling face of her infant son.

Copyright © 2005 Sheila Quigley
Published by Arrow