

Second Place Winner

The Pied Pipers of Houma

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You're a newcomer here, but no doubt you've noticed it. This time of year, in all of our neighborhoods, we're starting to see it: the twinkling star-lights that appear on the horizon-line, just over the next ridge or beyond the cul-de-sac's last telephone pole, to light our way and bring us cheer during this time, the darkest time of the year. This tale—I told you it was an old one, didn't I!—is about those lights, the lights that guide us from the darkness. But of course, where they lead isn't always to a better, brighter place.

The People were brought from one home, a forest fragrant with fungus and dying leaves, where the loam was thick and the nights were long and warm. They were taken there from their dens and swimming holes and brought to a new place, to be slaughtered. The People had luxuriant nut-brown fur that glowed gold in the sunset, and powerful tails that splashed the green waters and stirred the many-scaled fish below. They had indestructible orange teeth that could chew through the mats of moss and roots and sharp nails that were black as the deepest waters. And they watched in horror as, taken from their old home in the belly of a dank, wooden beast, they were placed in terrible cages, and knew only the screams of their fellows until the screams were quieted, one by one, and some glimpsed the boneyard where the bodies of their families and their playmates were kept—for it seemed the bloodthirsty giants cared only for their skins.

Against this tenement backdrop of terror, a few of the People made their escape. They climbed along the edge of the cliffs housing their brethren, round the edge of a clearing, and ran to the woods, which smelled foreign but comforting, the same smells of fish, of growing things and moldering things and mushrooms and vines and even creeping bears and wild cats and enormous lizards that slithered around the place

where they rested, exhausted but finally able to sleep.

Billy was a boy who lived in these woods, long after the People (though he called them by another name) settled by him, many leagues by sea from their ancestral homes. Billy's home was above the tendrils of the swamp, but it crept in anyway. The home was made of good, rot-resistant wood, but the must crept into his nostrils and saturated the fibers of his clothes. Vines and salamanders breached the windows, and the alligators, mostly lazy, harmless things, and serpents, wound their way through the banks of the water, basking in the pools of sunlight. In the summer too, there were dragonflies that cast flickering lights between the cathedral-like trees, amidst the deafening calls of the bullfrogs and cicadas.

Billie loved those firefly lights. But there were other lights too—warm lights that he glimpsed as he played alone on the shores beneath the house. He saw them most often at twilight, but he had been warned to stay near the house at this time, as his father oiled his gun and boots upstairs and his mother prepared their dinner. It was feeding time at twilight, and he was not to leave sight of the house.

The lights which appeared—most often on warm nights, and never during the light of day, were warm-looking and shimmery, with tones of rose and violet. They looked like spheres, golden orbs that would linger for an evening, always just beyond the next clearing. When he looked upon the lights he felt love, a growing feeling below his ribs. He never told anyone about the orbs, thinking they were just meant for him. Perhaps he was right.

One warm night as Billy was sitting beneath the house, one of the lights appeared, closer and larger than he had ever seen before.

"Hello?" he called, then felt silly.

But as he looked out between the curtains of cypress and Spanish moss, the orb grew larger and brighter. It seemed it was tugging at him to look at it, to get closer. The mosquitoes were swarming around him as he squinted at the light, but he could get no better idea of what it was. He picked up his BB gun where it rested by the stilts of the house, and began walking.

It seemed the light grew brighter even as he began moving a little closer. He crossed

the familiar gully, jumped across the roots of his favorite tree, and saw that the light was only a few feet away. He walked along one of the banks, across the roots of another giant, only to find that the light was still a little distance away.

He hardly knew he was running, until he heard his breath quicken. Over roots, up into the branches of one tree to the next, jumping from hummock to hummock, the light always wavered a little beyond him.

He was not sure how long he had been running when he stopped to catch his breath. His hands were bloody, sticky with pitch. His arms were stippled with mosquito bites and his shirt was irreparably soiled. He looked around him and realized he was not sure where he was, even in his own woods. He was not sure how far he had run, and he tried to remember what direction he had set out in.

He looked up to catch the direction from the stars but saw no moon, and no stars in the inky sky. The stars lay beyond the glow of the yellow sun, perhaps only five yards away. For the first time, he felt a tingling of fear touch his shoulders. In the back of his mind he thought he felt he was being watched. He glanced around and saw in the darkness round mirror-eyes all around him.

Only then did he see that the glowing light, his lodestar, was dimming. He turned his head once more and gasped, for the orb was moving. It dimmed then grew brighter than any light he had ever seen. Then it sank until it touched the water, then lower still, until it was below the foaming waters, glowing up at him from beneath the murk. He edged toward it, and heard the water rippling below him. The water was full of the nutria rats, lit from below. The water churned beneath their feet and they swam around the light in two perfectly symmetrical rings, weaving in and out of each other, their motions perfectly timed, like the gears of a clock.

For a few moments it was as though the bites on his skin, the cuts on his hands and knees were soothed and all he could see was the sinuous motions of the rats gliding in the waters. He took a step, then another, then another, and fell into the melee.

Though Billy's parents searched and searched, they could find no trace of their boy, who vanished in the eveningtide with his BB gun. They found no trail, nor a scrap of clothing nor gleaming curve of bone. Only when the weather grew cool, and Billy's father set out his traps, did he catch his last glimpse of Billy. He glimpsed a nutria rat, far larger than

he'd ever seen, its tail arched upwards in a strange facsimile of joy, prancing on the hummock that rose out of the bayou, and as he watched from his boat, stunned and quiet with one hand on a wire-trap, he heard, very faintly, human footfalls, and behind the nutria strode Billy, looking straight forward as he followed the rat, holding a glowing lantern in his hand. Before his father could call out to him, he strode into the forest, darkness encircling his ring of lamplight, and was never seen again.