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A Midnight Accord

by

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Perilous is the night, they say, that time of sleeping saints and impending disasters. Without its shadow to reveal its despicable intent, evil walks freely, keeping children indoors and women in pairs. No innocent man walks in solitude and stays his confidence long before his eye catches the darker parts of his mind. All preoccupy themselves with their destination, hurrying from place to place, and nary looking back. Solitude is the fear; night, the muse. Why it is, then, that one particular man—the one who walks hither, avoiding the street lamps—walks in calculated steps, and those passing him walk in stride, is known already. Why do I halt my journey upon his approach? Well, and some would agree, there are times when even the good intentioned must waver off the righteous path in order that they reclaim it. And tonight—this terrible night—is my night of reclamation.

Though necessarily I hold my course, this place, this time, this person approaching—this is the moment I dread; my life, however, my family—is calling for me this moment, and though the blood drains from my face I stand firm, and with much regret. A thousand times I ran through my options, and a thousand times I see no alternative. I risked more than myself with what I had done, and God help me if this night I can't make it disappear. The money is gone; that cannot be undone. My wife, my girls—they will not go unfed; they will not lose their home; they will not suffer for me, no, *because* of me, because I can't be the provider I promised I would be. Lord, I tried to do my duty to them. When recession grew thick, and good men lost on its account, I managed my job; I worked the long hours, asked for nothing in return—nothing but to keep working. And when more went out of work, and the bread lines opened up, and media, too afraid of making things worse by declaring depression, lied about the rising unemployment, I knew the signs. I had listened to the stories of my grandfather, held them, considered—and took it all out of market before it crashed.

But what could I do? What does one do when the savings grow shorter by the day, and dinners grow leaner...How excruciating, how cruel it is to be forced by circumstance to deprive your family of their welfare—and I, the provider, who is expected to make it all better, am forced to watch, helpless. What could be done, I had done; what options I had I had exhausted. What avenue does one take when they gather by the hundreds for simple labor on the docks? And so I took the money, and I did so with no regret—then.

Never mind the rate on the loan, I thought. I would get the money back some way, some how; but I needed the money then, oh, so badly, as I need it now. Consequences of the stomach outweigh those of uncertain future, but debts unpaid to men of this repute have consequences anew; and so I stand, waiting, as the man in the charcoal overcoat draws near, carrying our shared fate closer with each step, unaware that he is wearing the fabric of circumstance, which he himself helped a desperate man weave.

His eye catches mine in the dim and I do not turn away. He walks, first hesitantly, now determinedly, and I steady my trembling, first at the heart, then at the hand. I clench my fist for this purpose, hidden in my pocket with my treasures. Yes, payment should have been made with the currency instead, but the amount would not have sated my inglorious friend; how I wished it would. No, upon his first visit, I paid, a pittance, yes, but I paid—and paid again with a beating, Oh! A savage one! And before his departure I saw, through a half-muddled eye, that of his own, and how it looked back through the archway, to my wife—no, he would not be sated with the amount which rests, in another form, in my pocket; nor would I pay with what he would take the second visit. And so I squeeze the trembling out of my fist, and clutch the form in my pocket, caress it, as if God resides in its luster. Ah, the scamp! He doesn't know the secrets I hold there; his gait would be less bold if he did.

At last my visitor stood in my shadow, square to me, wearing his eyelids narrow and pursing his lips into a smirk that developed, I saw, as he drew nearer. He knew I had not the money; even if I had, I doubt he would have gone his way without achieving his diabolical end—for this night, it was not only money he was after, and his face revealed the fact. He was comforted by my appearance, I knew—a beaten man, he saw; one who had not the strength of heart or hand to keep him from his treachery. His purpose tonight was waiting, trembling, watching from the window, straining her eyes to find me down the street, knowing my intent, though halting me not; she knows as I do that the lord will not fault me for this sin; rather, He will fault me for not committing it.

The time has come, and I await my moment—wait, not for him to speak, but for divine intervention, though I know will never come. If I am to save myself, my family, I alone must intervene, but I stall regardless; I stall because I am not a fiend. My mind so focused on the man at hand, the task at hand, I neglected to keep an eye for witnesses—but now, walking quickly, silently ahead, another man approaches. He has a dark complexion in the night, and his black hair and brow are distinct. He is Middle Eastern, maybe, or maybe Italian. How had I not heard someone coming? My senses seemed to be heightened from my situation, but I had not heard him. I watch this new person approaching ahead of me, walking in calculated steps, my visitor still unaware of his presence as he approaches him from behind. Could it be? Could it be that my visitor has brought with him another? No, he came alone...

Ah, now I see them—rubber soled shoes. But the man wears a suit; an unusual combination. Why does he not go around us? My visitor reads my eyes and adopts my despondent color as he whirls around and greets the new man with a scream that quickly turns to a gurgle, and then silences. I stand and watch, frozen in disbelief, watching with frantic eyes as my oppressor falls in a wretched pile between myself and my new friend. Who this man is, I do not know. He stands now, looking at me, his face expressionless; watching my reaction as I stare at the luckless fellow between our feet. As I gaze down into the glazed eyes of my old enemy, I realize that previously I had misread his face.

How does it befit a desperate man to read the same in another? Desperation is a selfish emotion, and had it come sooner, my revelation would have changed nothing. Our intentions, born of mutual and identical necessity, would remain as they were, and my visitor and I would still have met at this crossroad.

Looking up, I should have felt fear for this new presence; I could only feel relief. I knew his qualms were not with me. Whatever I owed, whatever I did, died with the man on the sidewalk. Whatever the dead man owed; whatever the dead man did; whatever his desperate sorrows; his is a debt paid. My new friend does not speak; instead, he puts a gloved finger to his lips before walking away, silently, as he came, pursing them into the shape of a circle. A circle, a symbol of action; even at its most literal, the moment the pencil is set to paper, the line follows around, and by its finish, its beginning is as unavoidable as its end. As I take one last look at the man lying on the sidewalk, I wonder if, for him, it would have ever ended in a better way; but I cannot say so. If there is something to be said about the matter, it is that his was a fitting end to a dishonorable life, for this is the way that evil men die.