

The Darkness

By Ken Stark

It's always dark where I am. Once in a while, a bit of light gets in, but it never lasts for long.

She always said I belonged in the dark. I don't why. I tried to figure it out for a while, but I never could, so I stopped even trying. Best I ever figured, I must've done something bad to belong in the dark, but I don't know how much bad a kid can do, and I was pretty small when I was brung down. Don't know how long ago that was, but it was long enough ago that the clothes with the funny dogs rotted off me, and even that little piece I held onto with one them dogs still on it fell apart too.

That was my last friend, that little white dog. After that, I mostly went into my head and tried to remember what the outside was like. My mind conjured up images of white things overhead, and my toes curled up all on their own when I thought of soft green stuff covering the ground, but I was never sure if any of it was even real.

Sometimes, when She come down with food, I'd get a whiff of something sweet and could almost imagine that other world, but then He would come down too, and all I smelled was sourness. Sometimes He hurt me, but not always. Sometimes he just sat there on the step and drank from something shiny, and sometimes after drinking enough, he'd pull a black thing from under his shirt and point it at me and say that he should put a hole in my head. Other times, he just drank a lot and tucked the black thing under his chin, and cried.

And then one day I heard a bunch of angry noise coming down from above, and I figured He was coming down to hurt me bad. But the footsteps were too big. Too heavy. Too many to be just him. Then I heard voices. Loud voices. Shouting. And then He come tromping down the stairs in a run with his face all twisted up and scared, and others come down right after him. A whole bunch of people. More than I'd ever seen before. Almost as many people as I got fingers.

More shouting. Angry. Yelling back and forth. And then She come down too, all crying and mopping at her eyes. He pulled the black thing out from under his shirt and squinted into the dark at me, and I waited for my head to grow a hole, but then one of them new people run up and smacked something hard into the back of his neck and he dropped to the ground. With that, She started screeching like a chicken, so some of the others gathered her up and took her away.

Once She was gone, all those people bunched up at the bottom of the stairs poked their lights over at me, and they all talked at each other real fast.

"Is that...."

"Dear God, she's alive!"

"That was ten years ago. Is it really possible?"

"Down here all that time.... Oh, Lord have mercy...."

A big-bellied man with a shiny thing on his shirt stuck his light right at me and sucked in his breath, then he shushed the others and said to me in a kind of a whisper, "Mary? It's alright, Mary. No one's going to hurt you. No one's ever going to hurt you again."

I was scared, so I tried to dig myself into the dirt.

"Someone get a blanket!" he barked, and when no one moved fast enough, he took off his coat and come over to me on his tiptoes, saying, "It's alright, Mary. I'm not going to hurt you, I promise," and though I'd never seen the man before in my life, I believed him.

I stopped digging myself into the dirt and let him put his coat around me, and it was so warm and soft, I figured it must have come from one of them fluffy white things in the sky. I looked up at him and heard a voice come out of me

saying, "M-M-Mary.....?"

"Do you remember me, Mary?" he said, but then he soured up his face and shook his head, "No, of course you don't. You couldn't have been more than five years old. I'm Sheriff Callahan, Mary."

I tried to say the words back, but they come out all backwards. His face screwed up again, then he put his arms around me and I started crying for the first time since I could remember. He lifted me to my feet, then he picked me up in his arms and carried me back through all the others all standing in a pile at the bottom of the stairs.

The rest was a blur for a while. Bright lights. A soft hand stroking my hair. Something wet being wiped across my face. I heard the sound of a chicken clucking and looked over to see a woman all huddled up in the corner, and it took me a while even to recognize it was She. She was yelling something fierce, screeching, squealing, and some other fella with a shiny thing on his shirt was putting her hands together and clicking something around them. Then a brighter light hit my face and a little wind stroked my cheek, and I smelled something I'd only ever smelled before in a dream. I looked up and saw white things. Then I looked down and saw green. And then I cried some more, put my arms around the big man's neck, and let him carry me wherever he wanted me to go.

Anyways, that was a while ago and a lot's happened

since. I spent some time at a place where a bunch of people stuck lights at me and talked soft to me and called me 'Mary' like the man had done, and once I stopped being scared, they even washed me with pretty-smelling water, and a nice fat lady helped me get into some new clothes. There were no little white dogs on them, but there were flowers. Then a while later, the man with the shiny thing on his shirt come again, this time with a woman. The woman smiled, and they took turns talking to me.

"Do you remember me, Mary? Sheriff Callahan?"

I tried to answer, but the words didn't come. But I played as if I was cuddled up in his coat, and he smiled.

"That's right, Mary. Sheriff Callahan. This is my wife, Henrietta."

"Hello, Mary," the woman smiled through sad little eyes and brushed a bit of hair off my face, "Mary, do you understand what's happening? Where you are? This place is a hospital, and all of these people are here to help you."

"That's right, Mary," the man said, "You've been through a lot, and....."

The woman shushed him up with a mad look, then her face went all nice again and she took one of my hands in hers. Her hands was all wrinkly, but they was nice and soft.

"Mary, David and I want to help you, too," she said, "Now, the doctors say that there's no reason to keep you here, so we thought you might like to come home with us. Our Felicity moved to the city years ago, and her room is just as she left it. There's a nice soft bed and lots of pretty pictures on the walls, and I'll bet some of her clothes would fit you just fine. There's even a doll house she used to love to play with, so maybe you'll like that, too."

"Mary," the man put his arm around the woman's shoulders in a sweet kind of way, "Mary, we'd like you to come stay with us. As long as you don't mind being fussed over by a couple of old fogeys, I can promise you'll be safe, you'll be well-fed....."

"And you'll be loved," the woman finished for him, then her eyes filled up with tears.

I didn't know exactly what they was saying, but I ended up nodding and I watched as the tears finally broke free and poured down the woman's face. She held my hand all the tighter and beamed a big smile and they both said some more things, then the nice fat lady came around and they all talked together for a bit. A tall skinny lady handed the man and woman a bunch of papers, and while they grumbled and huffed, the nice fat lady took me back to my bed. She put the few things they'd given me into a little bag, then she put a pretty coat around me and tied shoes on my feet, and all the while, I could hear the man and woman talking. They were mostly whispers, like they were trying not to let

me hear, but I guess my ears were better than they thought.

"We have to know," the man said, squinting at the papers and making squiggles all over them.

"My only concern is for that poor child," the woman said back, "With all she's been through....."

"Henrietta, they've been bringing up bones for a week and they've just scratched the surface. When I think of all the missing persons in this county over the years.....the supposed runaways, the hitchhikers who've disappeared..... Hell, those two lunatics might've chalked up more kills than Bundy, Gacy and Pickton combined!"

"There's no way you could have known, David. *No* one could have known."

"*I* could have. I *should* have! All three kids suddenly pulled out of school with some cockamamie story about them going off to live with a rich uncle in Florida? I should've followed up. I should've at least dropped by to look those two lunatics straight in the eye."

"You can't keep beating yourself up, David. It wasn't your job. Why, if the police had to get involved every time a parent decides to home-school or ship their kids off....."

"Dammit, Henrietta, don't you see? It was all done on my watch! Those lunatics murdered their own sons and

locked a five-year-old girl in the basement to rot! *Jesus*, I'm just glad they were in state's custody when they hung themselves. If that'd happened on my watch too, the town would've torn me limb from limb, and I wouldn't blame a single man *jack* of them!"

The woman clucked her cheek. "Well, by some miracle, that little girl managed to hang on for ten long years. So your reputation aside, David, with all she's been through, that sweet little girl is the only thing I care about right now."

The man put the papers down and hugged the woman close. After a while, she hugged him back, and he spoke softly, but not too softly for me to keep hearing.

"My love, I care about her, too. You know I do. Why, that poor child has been through Hell, and every minute of every day of every one of those years rests squarely on my shoulders."

The woman started crying again. "You're a good man, David," she said.

"But not a very good sheriff," he said back, and now he was crying, too.

The nice fat lady peeked out at them through the corner of her eye and pretended to have trouble tying my shoes until they both split up and wiped away their tears, then she

coughed real loud and brought me back out to them.

After that, they took me on a ride through the outside, and I had to squint my eyes almost shut against the light while a wind whipped up my hair. Then we come to a pretty house with flowers all around, and it was just like they said. The man was sweet and gentle, and the woman fussed over me and had me try on all kinds of different clothes, always cooing and clucking and telling me how pretty I looked. I felt all tight being wrapped up all the time, and the food they give me didn't always sit right, but I knew they was trying real hard to make me feel good, so I didn't mind.

The man went off every morning and left the woman and me alone, and she showed me lots of things I'd never seen before. There was a box that sung songs and another with people moving around in it, but mostly we sat all quiet and she tried to get me to make squiggles on a piece of paper. And when I got them wrong, she didn't get mad. She'd just smile nice and say, "That's okay, sweetheart," and I'd try again. And when the man come home, he'd be as nice as you please, but even so, I could see something funny working behind his eyes.

It was like that for three whole days. Then one night after the woman put me in bed and kissed me on the forehead like she always done, I laid there wide awake, listening to them talking through the walls. They was trying to talk real quiet, but I could hear them plain as day.

"What are you saying, David?"

"My dear, all I'm saying is that there is more to the story than we know."

"Well, I can't believe it."

"Nor can I, but evidence doesn't lie. And the evidence so far is....." he stopped talking then, and I could almost hear him pressing an ear up to the wall. I stayed perfectly still, not making a sound, and he soon went back to talking, this time even quieter. "Is she asleep? Are you sure? I thought I....well, never mind. The point is, my dear, they've pulled up dozens of remains, and they all tell the same story."

"No, David, I don't believe it! I *won't!*"

"Well, fortunately, it is not up to you or I to believe or disbelieve anything, Henrietta. That falls under the purview of a great many men and women with pockets full of diplomas." The woman tried to say something back, but he shushed her and said almost too softly for me to hear, "Tut-tut now, my dear, there's no need to get carried away. We'll let it be for now. They are well aware of Mary's circumstances and condition, and they've arranged for one of the best doctors in the world to speak to her. Believe me, my dear, all everyone wants is to get Mary the help she needs. But she can only get that help if we know the truth."

I could hear the woman sniffing, so I knew she was crying. The man hushed a few words to comfort her, but it was too low for me to hear. Then it got real quiet, and I waited there listening until I couldn't hear no more.

I didn't know what all the words meant or why they'd both been so upset, but it still made me all nervous like I used to be when I heard them other folks squawking and stomping around over my head. Them other folks used different words, and they was always real loud instead of whispering, but I always knew when they was talking about me. And whenever they was talking about me, something bad always happened.

And now I had that same feeling, like something bad was gonna happen. And I figured I knew what it was. With all their talk about taking care of me and loving me and all that other stuff with the dresses and the squiggles, they'd had their fill of me. They was gonna bring me back down to the dark.

I tried to tell myself that it didn't matter. Truth was, the food they give me never set well, and I didn't like being wrapped up so tight in all of them clothes anyway. And the more I thought about it, the more I wanted things just to go back to the way they were. No squiggles. No dresses. No fussing over my hair and making me eat little squares of dead food with a silver thing.

I suppose thinking those things long enough is what did it. By the time I heard snoring, my belly was starting to rumble up a fuss, and I just couldn't stand it no more. All I wanted was to get things back to where I knew what was what. I kicked the blankets off and shucked off my clothes so I was finally free, then I snuck down the hall and cracked open their door just enough to know that they was both asleep.

The man was snoring, and the woman was making a kind of whistling sound through her pinched little nose. I went up to the man and squatted down beside him for a while, just watching him sleep and smelling him breathe, but even though I was being real quiet, something woke him up. His eyes bugged out real funny when he saw me squatting there beside him, but before he could do anything else, I twisted his neck real hard and heard it snap. He didn't yell or nothing. He just lay there all still, just like that first boy I done all them years ago. But his eyes was all bugged out and moving, so I knew he could still see. His eyes even followed me as I crawled up on top of him, so I gave him a big smile to show him how happy I was, figuring he'd like that.

Then the woman started to wake up too, so I crawled over and squatted on top of her, just like I'd done with that other boy. Just like him, she woke up for real with me on top of her, and I let her scream all she wanted as I opened her up. Fact is, her screams didn't last nearly as long as that boy's, and she weren't likely to wake nobody up anyhow.

When she was good and dead, I painted myself from head to toes with her blood, then I had the first real food I'd had since the last time She'd brung some down to me. Some of that food had been big, some small, some scared, some fighting to the end, but none had ever tasted better than that wrinkly old woman. Once my belly was full, I laid myself down in the goo and let it sink into my skin, and I think I even fell asleep for a while. When I woke up, the sun was streaming through the windows and the man was still breathing and bug-eyed, so I took my time and listened to him gurgle away with everything I did.

By the time I was done, the sun had gone back down, so I used the last of the man's innards to paint my body back to red, then I snuck out of the room, down the hall, and out the front door. Back into the dark. Back where I belonged.

Like I said, it's always dark where I am. Once in a while, a bit of light gets in, but it never lasts for long. I'd never let it. The dark is where the food is, after all. And my belly is already starting to rumble something awful.

