

SHADOW IN THE FOREST

Excerpt from 'Shadow in the Forest':

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EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER SEVEN:

Evelyn arrives home from the now familiar route at eight. It is almost dark, already the sun is setting much earlier. One of the fish lightly pan-fried with margarine, onion and pepper tastes like a restaurant meal, but even after the cooking there is still a faint trace of the beast in the air, or is it just the memory lodged in her olfactory glands? It was a good idea seeing Joseph, even if she finally decided not to discuss this problem with him. She is in considerably better spirits than this morning. If she changes her mind, he is always there, and now she can contact him via radio.

Late next morning she wakes from her first good sleep in ages. The smell is definitely there, it is not just her, giving a claustrophobic atmosphere to the cabin, the oppressive heaviness of a distinct other presence. Maybe it will never completely disperse. Male glands. While working through the morning at her notes, she leaves the door open to air the room. Late afternoon she makes herself lie down for an hour, even though she is not in the least tired, as that night she will be tracking.

After dinner, the second fish, Evelyn again applies herself to her notes, still feeling fresh, and just before midnight dons her gear in preparation for the long dark hours ahead. In addition to her protective clothing and emergency pack, this includes: the radio receiver, which she uses to dial into the particular animal's transmitter frequency, a three-pronged aerial, a spotlight with a spotlight battery, a headlamp strapped to her forehead, and tucked into her belt, a map, compass and binoculars.

She makes her cumbersome way across the stream and climbs up the opposite bank to a prominent spur. She will give herself a bit of a break tonight and follow old, sick Henry as he ambles painfully around his feeding area. Trying his transmitter frequency she immediately picks up a signal, beep, beep, beep, fortuitously he is just below her, near the hut, and moving slowly in the direction of the pine forest. She descends and follows him into the enclosing depths of the forest, where there is no residual light and she is completely reliant on her headlamp and Henry's steady beep. It is important to try and keep back a good distance from him so as not to disturb his normal foraging habits. Evelyn settles down into her routine, vital data for her project, but cold and boring work.

As always, she feels how eerie and unsettling it is trailing a disembodied electronic signal through the night, but particularly in such complete blackness. The dark seems to fall around her like a heavy blanket, and it is this perhaps that triggers an increasing restlessness, and a curious 'strain' in the work itself, the source or sources of which, she cannot initially fix. Since his movements are normal, she assumes Henry has no idea she is following him, and slowly an unnerving fantasy settles on Evelyn, with a growing persistence, and maybe partly in reaction to the boredom, that while she is tracking she is also being tracked, a conceit that once established, makes it difficult for her to give sustained proper attention to her quarry and her work.

This somewhat paranoid but hardly unnatural sensation she has occasionally experienced on previous tracking nights, and also on previous field trips, but for some reason tonight it is much stronger than she has ever known it. Is it simply her surrounds: the low creeping mist, the dense chilled air, the unseen but imagined presence of the great gloomy forest canopy casting her into a sort of underworld, one seemingly peopled by the ghostly trunks and wild frozen limbs sequentially caught in her roving headlamp?

But it is not these effigies themselves that seem to be spooking her, as they did that time before, but something that seems to lie behind them, or beyond them. The spirit, the presence of the forest itself? Or some more specific presence. She switches off her receiver, and then her headlamp. Utter pitch. She feels extraordinarily vulnerable standing there blinking blind—a diurnal domesticated mammal completely out of its element—but she hears only what she knows to be the usual night crepitations, the occasional sharp rustle of possum, quoll and bird, the various small creatures of the night going about their businesses. The faint background trickle of an icy stream.

She tries to tune herself into the inky darkness, the subtleties of the living forest, much as she has tuned her receiver into Henry's frequency, let herself feel finely, be actively passive, perhaps even discover and develop senses other than her customary overused five. What aren't they telling her? Or, instead of reaching out for further senses, she should further 'sensitise' her five, attempt to attain the smell and hearing of a wild thing. Then maybe that further instinct would come to her, but through her senses.

Take smell; beasts smell like we see, all those subtle tonal gradings, but more, there is a dimension of time: they also smell what has been, as though one were to look at a scene and also see its past, and so perhaps guess its future. And hearing; all those higher frequencies, the silent dog whistle... She recalls a Victorian ghost story she once read about a man who finds an old silent whistle in a ruin; he blows on it and unknowingly summons up a malevolent spirit.

So, it seems what is needed here is a perception presently beyond her. That is, if there is actually something out there needing to be perceived. But then why such a powerful feeling? Is in fact something following her, or far more probably, is she creating this 'something' in some fashion for some

reason with her peculiar complex of fancies and fears? Is she somehow then, weirdly, tracking herself? If so, what could this mean?

She switches the headlamp back on, swings it around erratically, focussing on the varying narrowing perspectives presented in the beam by the random placement of the ancient pines. Nothing, anywhere, of course. And if there really is something, then why doesn't it declare itself, but then why should it? Why would it? Still, if there is nothing to see, and nothing different to hear, nothing she can in any way discern, then she must suppress what are, surely, unfounded irrational emotions. And nothing new there for her unfortunately. Once more she must get a hold of her nerves and get on with her job, proceed through the dull routine just as she has on previous nights, just as she must on successive nights.

This Evelyn forces herself to do, but at some personal cost. Henry spends the rest of the night in the pine forest, therefore so does she, unable ever to shake off the firm conviction, without any proof, that all the time she is being followed, just as all the time she is following. A little before dawn she walks out and returns to her hut, considerably shaken, although the night has been fine and still, and she has collected good data on Henry's nocturnal feeding range, which she can usefully compare with that similarly compiled from the other five study-group pademelons. It has been a long night partially because Henry is a far less efficient forager. With his advanced disease and age it is becoming increasingly difficult for him to simply sustain himself, a struggle that must shortly defeat him.

Back inside the hut Evelyn's anxiety dissipates, but she still feels as though she is under some kind of peculiar spell. Exhaustion, presumably, although she doubts whether she could sleep at this point. Some muesli and coffee help cheer her up and also warm her, but the dreamy sensation lingers.

Everything she touches seems slightly unreal, every act she performs, supernatural, either with a strange déjà-vu tinge to it or alternately a feeling of pre-destination. Whenever she stops moving, it is as if she is somehow still in motion, or perhaps that things are in motion around her. All sights and sounds and smells seem more vivid, even though, paradoxically, experienced through an enveloping gauze, which like a theatrical scrim creates a sensual chiaroscuro.

Sometimes it is like this for her before a bad headache, a sort of silver-tingling light euphoria, although at present there is no accompanying background heaviness. She was also like this, she remembers, powerfully, for days, as she completed her thesis; it was when she wrote her most brilliant and difficult passages. She was inspired. And recalling this, suddenly she is filled with a nervy energy and feels intolerably cramped by the damp little room. The air is thick and slightly rank, soupy, all metal surfaces are wet. Maybe the dense humidity is why everything feels strange, and also why it is so very silent. Opening the cabin door she peers out into the grey twilight, raw with cold. The sky is clear, a few sparse stars linger faintly. She slips her boots back on and tromps down through the sodden grass to the creek.

Before her is the bulk of Mount Jerusalem, silhouetted sharply against the pre-dawn sky. Maybe she can scurry up to the top before sunrise, the east is cloud-free, it is a good opportunity. She takes a few deep gulps of the freezing spring-water, returns, grabs her parka, sashes it round her waist, and heads off.

Happy for some reason to be back out in the biting air, and without all her heavy night gear, she climbs quickly and confidently up the rocky slope, skirting the tarns, not sticking to any path, leaping recklessly from boulder to boulder and pushing through the tough scrub. She feels re-born out of the long dreary night, alert and elate.

Ascending is easy and pleasurable, she is almost floating up, climbing with the strange ease of a dream, trailing puffs of vapour into the frosty air, immune to cold and exhaustion like a God. Although, as the going steepens, she starts to flag, slows, even pauses for a moment to examine some beautiful red lichen and catch her breath, but it is not long before she is standing triumphantly at the summit.

The wind is bracing, and although she is now sweating, Evelyn wraps her parka around and raises the hood. She will be cold shortly. She has no idea what actual time the sun rises, and anyway hasn't her watch. The eastern horizon is significantly lighter than the sky but there is as yet no distinct glow. The view is fine nevertheless. Gazing north-west over the lakes' country, towards the departing night, the long stretches of water are soft and silver, fading with the forest into the grey distance. Now she is still, the dreamy sensation, spell, again manifests. Perhaps it has never left her.

A flickering movement at the base of her vision diverts her attention. Almost directly below her over the steep eastern wall, is a wide U-shaped valley formed from sheets of clay, poorly dried acid soils supporting sedgeland, bogs and stretches of wet heath. She knows this landscape well from observation and her reading. The flat level ground and a bolster plant community, mostly cushion plants and alpine coral fern, impede any water flow. The valley was probably a lake in times past and would quickly fill with water again in heavy and continuous rain.

She scans the landforms. Nothing. No, there it is: a pademelon, moving quickly, very quickly, almost as if it were being pursued. It is Henry! Old, sick Henry showing absolutely amazing dexterity, desperate dexterity, scampering erratically, frantically, hardly bothering to avoid the pools and bogs. He looks exhausted and terrified. Why?

She peers in the general direction from where he has run, south-west down the valley back towards her hut. For a while she sees nothing. Then her focus is caught, as in a trap.

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