

OUT OF THE DARK WORLD
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GRACE CHETWIN

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for Sallie and Barbara

*What seest thou else
In the dark backward and abysm of time?*

(William Shakespeare, THE TEMPEST, I.i.)



*M*eg walked along along the empty roadway, her feet making no sound. Smooth gray ridges ran waist-high on either side of her, like banks of dingy ice piled up by giant plows. How had she got onto that road? And where did it lead? She did not know. Beyond the ridges was empty gray, flat as construction paper. No houses, no trees, no telephone poles—not even any sky.

Meg looked ahead. Nothing. Only the gray.

She began to feel uneasy.

The place was lifeless. She must go, out of there. Fast. She turned and hurried her steps back along the road.

When she awoke, she went to the window. The sky was heavy and dark as the gray roofs across the street. It was going to snow.

For a moment her face brightened. Snow on Christmas Eve.

How wonderful.

Then she remembered her nightmare.

It had been years since she'd had one—not since she'd had the mumps, in fact. What had it meant? Every dream told something, Gran Jenkins would say, even if only that you had eaten too much cheese for supper. How she wished for Gran Jenkins at that moment. But Gran Jenkins was back Home in Wales, many miles away. Gran Jenkins had second sight and knew all about dreams and nightmares, and such things. She'd talk about them with Meg in a way that Mother never would. Meg also had the Sight, so Gran had told her often since she was very small.

“But how can you know that, when I've never shown a sign of it?”

“You will,” Gran had told her, laying a finger along the side of her nose. “You will some day. Just wait and see.”

Meg missed Gran very much, even after three years away from her, living in America. They'd been so close. Gran Jenkins would have comforted her and explained what the matter was.

Meg sighed. Mother would have to do. After all, she was also a Jenkins, she also had the Celtic blood. She also had the second sight, some, even if she didn't like talking about it.

She decided to ask Mother about the nightmare during breakfast.

But breakfast was so full of last-minute Christmas shopping plans that Meg never had a moment with Mother alone, and after that she herself forgot all about it.

That night, she and Sue hung their stockings over the mantlepice, even though, as Meg loudly declared, they were way too old for them now, with Sue in seventh grade and she herself in eighth. But they'd had the stockings since they'd been born, and anyway, as Meg also declared, for all the large mystery boxes under the tree, they still loved the fun and surprise of finding little things.

"Not at five-thirty in the morning, you won't," Mother warned them, "unless you promise to keep it to yourselves." They promised, and with that she shooed them off to bed so that she could wrap the last of the gifts.

It was not until Meg was dropping off to sleep that she remembered her nightmare. Oh well, maybe tomorrow, she thought. And again—maybe not.

For tomorrow was Christmas Day.

Meg stood on the roadway under the sullen light.

The air was heavy and still.

The ridges seemed closer, longer. Like great gray worms, silent and secret; ice-serpents guarding the sides of the road, penning her in.

She began to walk along the road, slowly, and without thinking at first, then faster. All at once, she became aware of a queer pulling sensation in her head. She was being drawn forward along that road, against her will.

She tried to stop. To resist. Danger lay that way. she could feel the cold of it curling out towards her. She struggled, fighting to slow her

feet but still they kept moving, faster, until the very road seemed to roll under her, moving her on into, what? Terrified now, she called out.

"No! Mother! Sue!"

A hand gripped her shoulder.

". . . Meg? Shh! Guess what! It's snowing! It's snowing! And look!"

Meg opened her eyes a slit to find her bedside light on and Sue crouched beside her, dangling their bulging stockings in her hands. The hand holding Meg's stocking was pressed against Meg's shoulder.

"Meg?"

Sue let Meg's stocking go on top of her.

Meg closed her eyes in relief, cuddling her lumpy stocking. Good old Sue for waking her. The nightmare—her *second* nightmare—was losing its hold. The road, the ice-serpents, were giving place to familiar things.

Yet the sense of danger lingered.

Sue shook out her stocking happily onto Meg's comforter.

"Hey—Meg! Look!" Sue spread her things around, then held them up one by one. "I got saltwater taffy, and notepaper, and . . . six markers and ribbons and . . . two pairs of leg warmers and a book of cryptograms and—look at this neat little shoulder bag!"

Meg laid aside her stocking and, climbing out of bed, pulled up her window shade. White flakes flocked the dark glass, slid

down to pile onto the sill.

Meg let the shade fall, glanced back at her clock.

Four-forty five.

Definitely too early to wake Mother. Maybe she could tell Sue about it. She looked over to Sue flipping through the pages of her new puzzle book. But then again, maybe not. She hated fuss, and Sue loved a drama. No, strong as the dream was upon her, she would still wait to tell Mother about it first.

Going back to her bed, she took her stocking and dumped its contents out.

And Christmas Day began.

Not once during the whole day did Meg have Mother alone.

That night Mother and Father went to a late, late party. That was when Meg smuggled the old clown nightlight out of the bathroom cabinet and hid it under her pillow ready to plug in the moment she was left alone.

Mother came in smelling of new perfume, she sat on the edge of the bed and kissed the tip of Meg's nose.

"If you need anything, our number's by the phone." Her face went worried. "You've been so quiet Meg. What's wrong?"

Meg sat up on one elbow. Now was the time. Now at last she could tell Mother about the dream.

But Father had other ideas. He and Mother were late, he called from the bottom of the stairs. If they were any later they'd arrive just as everyone else was going home.

Mother stood up. "Meg?"

"I'm fine, Mother," Meg lied. "Except for too much turkey."

Mother laughed. "I'll buy that! Okay—I'll look in on you when I get back. It was a good day, wasn't it?"

Meg smiled and nodded. Meg nodded Mother out and down the stairs. A good day. As good a Christmas as ever they'd had. It was the thought of the night that bothered her.

Meg decided to read for a while. she crossed to her bookshelf, picked out a favorite book, a collection of ancient Welsh bardic tales called *The Mabinogion*. She turned the pages until she came to the story she liked best: the tale of Prince Pwyll of Dyfed and his bride, Rhiannon, who some said was also Morgan le Fay, King Arthur's witch sister. Meg just reached the best bit where Pwyll first saw Morgan le Fay in her "garment of shining gold brocaded silk," riding towards him on a "big fine pale white horse," when she saw that it was time for lights out.

She finished the page, plugged in the nightlight, then flipped the main wall switch and slid down under her covers.

She closed her eyes, then opened them again. She couldn't bear the thought of going off to sleep again alone. Maybe she'd go and tell Sue about the dream after all. Sue's room was next door.

"Sue?"

She touched Sue's shoulder. "Sue? Sue—wake up!"

Nothing.

Sue went down every night like a tropical sun. And there was about as much chance of bringing one back as the other.

Meg sighed and crept back to bed. Maybe it was just as well. But now she was determined not to risk that scary road again. She'd stay awake until Mother got home by counting sheep. It was bound to work, because she'd never gotten to sleep doing that yet!

The air over the road seemed thick with quiet. On either side the ice-serpents had reared their glassy backs as though in her absence they'd tried frantically to crawl away. Another time Meg would have enjoyed sliding up and down those spiny ridges, but now she wouldn't go near them, not even to get off the road.

How dead it was out there. A road through nothing. Leading where? Nowhere she wanted to go.

Almost at once Meg felt again the queer pulling sensation in her head.

And her feet began to move.

Concentrate, she told herself. Make your feet stand still. But she couldn't. Faster and faster they went until, as before, the road appeared to move under her, speeding her along.

A small black speck appeared on the roadway ahead. She couldn't say why, but the sight of it frightened her.

Was it still, or was it moving to meet her? It was impossible to tell. But it was growing larger very fast.

It was perfectly round.

Like a dot.

No, not a dot: a small black marble.

Apparently coming straight at her, getting ever bigger and bigger—bigger than a Ping-Pong ball, bigger than a bowling ball, bigger than a basketball, bigger than any ball she'd ever seen. Nearer and nearer it came, a monstrous black snowball about to overtake her.

Turn, turn, she told herself. Go back the other way.

With a great effort, she forced herself around at last and leaned over, pumping her arms, straining to run against the pull in her head, and the movement of the road.

Was the ball gaining on her? It must be as big as a house by now, she thought. And looming right over her.

But I won't look, she told herself. I won't.

The ground surely should be shaking, the air filled with its rumbling.

But all was silence.

Out of the silence a voice suddenly cried from right behind her:

"Help me!"

Meg looked back—and up.

The gray was gone, the ice-serpents were gone, the light was gone and the great black thing was rolling over her.

Meg sat up.

For a moment or two she stared fearfully about the familiar room—at the white shiny dressing table, the oak desk, the music stand sticking up like a praying mantis in the middle of the floor,

the bright warm colors on her bookshelves in the glow of the clown nightlight.

Then she jumped out of bed and switched on every light in the place: the ceiling light, the desk light, the lamp on her music stand, the crinolined lady on her dressing table with the light under her parasol, the light on her television set—and the set itself, with the sound off so as not to wake Sue.

There. Now there was light. Plenty of it. The road was gone. And she was safe in bed in Locust Valley, Long Island.

She climbed back into bed and huddled against the pillows with her comforter up to her chin. For the next hour she watched an old grainy movie full of pasty-faced men in baggy pants and wide ties shooting at one another with clumsy guns. Soon Mother would come home and Meg would tell her about the awful nightmare place that was waiting for her somewhere the moment she fell asleep, and somehow Mother would understand and make it go away.

Perhaps.