

1963

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Recommended Citation

Dessart, Gina. "Watcher of the Dark." *New Mexico Quarterly* 33, 4 (1963). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol33/iss4/23>

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Gina Dessart

WATCHER OF THE DARK

He stood just outside the door of the cabin and, his fingers stumbling with cold, lit a cigarette from the burned-down butt of the last one. Then he turned up the collar of the jacket some man—he didn't know, which one, maybe a deputy or one of the forest rangers—had lent him. The jacket was warm and heavy, and he was grateful for it in the cutting wind. But when he noticed that it held the shape of another man's body, that there was a smell of another man on it, he twitched with distaste.

But Christ, he added immediately. What a childish, idiotic reaction! "Coffee, Mr. Snyder?"

She startled him, this woman appearing out of nowhere with the mug in her hand. Steam rose up from the mug, as gray as a dream in the thin light of dusk. Now he remembered that voices had floated out of the cabin when the door was opened, although he hadn't been aware of the sounds at the time.

"Thank you very much," he mumbled, taking the mug from the woman.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We've run out of cream and sugar. So many people."

"Yes."

He might have added that he didn't mind, he liked his coffee black. But the words were heavy, the effort to form them seemed too great. Perhaps they wouldn't have come out right, anyhow; perhaps he'd have said the coffee was good, the smell of it was good because it filled the hollows of time. He wasn't sure what he might have said.

"Why don't you come inside, Mr. Snyder? Come inside where it's warm," she urged with the soft insistence he had heard all afternoon. How many times had he heard the question this afternoon? Dozens, hundreds of times: Why don't you come inside, wait inside, why stand out there in the cold?

"No!"

He shook his head, not as further emphasis, but to brush away the warm temptation of comfort. And then saw, or thought he saw,

the hurt on her face. "Thank you, I'd rather be outdoors," he added apologetically.

Somewhat mollified, she shrugged. And he could see, as clearly as though the words had been printed on the snow: Well, I suppose you can't blame the poor man.

He gulped the coffee, handed her the cup she was waiting for. (They were running out of cups too. So many people.) He wanted her to go away, leave him alone, this woman with the kind, featureless face who had spent the whole day pouring coffee, cup after cup, for the men drifting in and out—searchers, reporters, men from the sheriff's department in shiny boots, shiny professionalism, a few sensation seekers whose mindless curiosity had driven them up the canyon to find out what was going on: "Have they found them yet? Any news, any news?" And she, the only woman on the mountain, tended her big enameled coffeepot, and tried to be kind to poor Mr. Snyder.

Poor Mr. Snyder. *Mr. Snyder didn't trudge through snow looking for his son, like the fathers of the other boys. Mr. Snyder stayed behind at the cabin, smoking his endless cigarettes.*

When at last the woman went back inside, he dropped his cigarette and stepped on it, thrust his hands in the slit pockets of the borrowed jacket. What was the use of joining the search? He knew with a dreadful weariness that his inadequate body, white and thin under the bulk of his clothing, would have failed him inside of an hour. He'd have done more harm than good—a man who had spent six days of every week for the last seven years bent over a workbench, delicately replacing balance wheels and adjusting the tension of hair-fine springs in the minute casings of watches. Five watches, ten watches a day. Sometimes twenty. Twenty times six. A hundred and twenty watches a week. Times fifty weeks. Six thousand watches. Times seven years. Forty thousand, fifty

The smell of the jacket was strong again and the twitching of his body had turned into a steady trembling. Suddenly an insane impulse shot through him, the impulse to run blindly off into the night, to shout, to claw through the night, to tear the mountain and the darkness and the cold apart with his bare hands in order to find the boy. The impulse flamed to brief incandescence, died away. He unbuttoned the jacket, got out his lighter and cigarettes.

And waited. In a borrowed jacket that kept out the wind.

YESTERDAY MORNING, ages ago in the warm Arizona sunshine, the boy had been wearing a bright red shirt and an old pair of levis, thin from many washings. He fussed when his mother insisted that he take a sweater with him.

"Aw gee, Mom. I'm not a baby. I don't want to look like a sissy."

"It will be cold up there tonight," his mother said sternly. "It's always colder in the mountains."

"Well, I have a bed roll—"

"Take the sweater, Ronnie. Take it," Marjorie said.

Marjorie in one of her firm moods, with no trace of her recent shrillness. Just firm, as befitted the daughter of a successful New York attorney.

But she was no longer Marjorie Berne; she was Marjorie Snyder now, wife of that poor Mr. Snyder who stood beside the cabin while the fathers of the other boys—even the fathers of the four boys who had, at noon today, been discovered safely holed in at Midway Lodge—while all these rugged men climbed tirelessly from one ridge to the next, still searching for the two boys who had disdained the safety of the Lodge. All morning long they had searched, all afternoon, and now it was night.

Poor Mr. Snyder, shaking with cold, lit another cigarette from the butt of the one pinched between his fingers.

And closed his mind against the picture of Marjorie, waiting in the empty house down in the valley. But not before wondering whether Marjorie, insisting on the sweater, had foreseen the cutting cold front that had swept down from the north, lashing ferociously at the ring of mountains around the valley, dumping an unprecedented foot of snow on the peaks and piling high drifts in the canyons. Had Marjorie, by some sort of divine intuition, foreseen this hours before the Weather Bureau began to sputter out its futile, too-late warnings?

Perhaps. But what did it matter? What good was a single sweater against the razor cuts of a wind from the north?

He raised his hand and bit the knuckle of his right forefinger—such long delicate fingers, the hands of a surgeon, so precise, so delicate—thinking to share the cut of the wind. But the taste of blood on his tongue was warm and salty, inexplicably comforting. Warm, salty, pungent. Like the smell of sausage and cheese, of pickles and pastrami in the delicatessen under the El that had once been his home. When he was five years old, maybe six, he had made a wrong turn one day;

immediately he was lost in the roar of the city, a small frightened child with a drippy nose, whimpering as he ran through crowded streets looking for the store, the one particular store where he belonged.

Who had found him, who had taken him home? He couldn't remember. All he knew was that in a big city a child is never really lost. There is always a cop or a neighbor woman to return him to the known and familiar.

The safety of a big city, the safety of New York. Why had they left it, why had they listened, he and Marjorie, to his uncle's tales of life in the warm desert country of Arizona? They were city people, yet they had been seduced by sunshine (and the promise of a steady job), lured away from the snug familiarity of New York into the open reaches of the west with its strange, inhuman challenges.

In New York the boy would have spent Saturday afternoon visiting the Museum of Natural History; he wouldn't have wanted to climb a mountain.

"Coffee, Mr. Snyder?"

In the dark—night had closed down firmly on the mountains—he couldn't see the steam of the coffee, and the woman's face was a shapeless blur of flesh. But he took the mug from her gratefully, expecting her to say, Come inside, come sit by the fire.

"They're bringing in helicopters in the morning," she said instead. "From Fort Reed."

Helicopters? Helicopters? In the morning?

The morning would be too late. Perhaps it was already too late for boys dressed in thin levis and red cotton shirts, their toes frozen, and no mittens for their hands. Twelve-year-old hands, still unformed and always a little dirty. (The hands of a surgeon replacing the balance wheel of a watch. It takes great precision to repair a watch.)

"Come inside, Mr. Snyder. Come inside."

He followed her this time, stepping blindly into the yellow rectangle of light made by the opened door of the cabin; then, forgetting the two steps, stumbled on the threshold. And for a wild moment thought she was Marjorie, this nameless woman whose hand was tender on his arm when he stumbled.

Not the Marjorie of today, the sometimes harried mother of Ronnie, but the one he had met seventeen years ago in the balcony of Carnegie Hall. Marjorie with the gloss of Barnard still on her, well dressed, pretty, and a little supercilious toward a young man who

could boast of nothing more impressive than night courses at City College. Pre-med, he had told her, although even then, as early as that, the knowledge was in him that he would never have the courage to follow the dream his long sensitive fingers had spelled out for him. But for a while another dream filled his life, the attainable dream of marrying Marjorie—a tender, passionate girl under the bright clichés of the education to which she had been exposed. Marjorie's tenderness, to the dismay of her family, found excuses for frailty; and passion can blind the mind to the point where moonbeams take the place of the moon. Why reach beyond the rapture of the moment?

"Here, Mr. Snyder. Come sit over here," the woman who was not Marjorie said, guiding him into the heat of the cabin. It was crowded in the little room. And smoky beyond belief. A thick blend of wood smoke and tobacco smoke, of acrid steam from the coffeepot, of greasy steam from the soup kettle sitting beside the coffee pot on the stove, and rancid steam from the bodies of men who had given in at last to bone-wilting weariness. Men who had spent their final ounce of energy in telling themselves that tomorrow the search would go on.

The search for two boys lost in the blackness of some hidden canyon, lost on a narrow rocky ledge, or under the drifts of the treacherous, unseasonable snow. Why hadn't they stayed together, all six of them? Why had two wandered off by themselves?

Two boys, two. He tried to remember that there were two of them out there in the bleak night, but his mind refused to hold the picture of an unknown youngster. All he could see, in relentlessly sharp focus, was the image of Ronnie, his boy, his and Marjorie's. A boy with Marjorie's brown hair and warm, vulnerable mouth, with his grey eyes, his small framework of bones. But not his hands, thank God. Even as a baby the boy's hands had been square and sturdy.

"Soup, Mr. Snyder?"

His throat closed against the gagging smell of beans and hambone. He shook his head.

But she didn't invite him inside. That's right, she didn't have to. He was inside, wasn't he? He was sitting beside the fire. Where it was warm. Yes.

And realized, with a stab of guilt as real as pain, that the other boy's father was not in the room. Still searching?

He began to watch for him now whenever the door opened to let in another gray-faced man. "No. No trace of them," the gray-faced

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men said as they came in, answering the question before it could be asked, pointedly refusing to say more. Falling asleep, one after another, in the dense, smoky warmth of the cabin.

He couldn't sleep. Would he ever sleep again? Or was he doomed to this aching wakefulness for the rest of his life? Awake, waiting. Hoping. Clutching at hope, hanging tight to the image of his son, a boy who had wanted to climb a mountain. As though only this image could sustain hope. This image, and the knowledge that another man had not yet given up.

The man's name was Billings. They had spoken together this morning—the various fathers, some of them fortunate enough to have sons with the intelligence or prudence to stay overnight at the Lodge. He couldn't recall now which one was Billings, the father of the other reckless boy; but he knew he would recognize him immediately.

The man Billings was still out in the cold night looking for the strays. What sort of man was he? A quiet man, a big bluff man? Obviously a man with superhuman endurance. A man in whom hope was still alive. Could he, poor Mr. Snyder, stand beside him and share a morsel of his hope?

Poor Mr. Snyder, begging for crumbs.

Poor Mr. Snyder, sitting in a sleep-clogged room, looking from one slumped figure to the next—and reading defeat on every sleeping face. No. It was not possible to hope. The boys were lost. Away from the shelter of the Lodge, they could never have survived last night's blizzard, today's bitter cold. There could be no hope.

Why then did the man named Billings continue his futile search? Why didn't he give up?

Suddenly he knew the answer. It was as though Ronnie had given him the necessary clue, for now he remembered an exchange with his son that he had been trying to deny. (Irritation, in retrospect, is a scratchy, mean emotion.) This had happened yesterday morning, as the boy was getting ready to leave the house:

"Why do you want to go hiking again, Ron?" he had asked, with no foreboding of disaster. But with a touch of petulance, because the energy of a half-grown boy shamed his cautious, creeping life, from house to car, from car to workbench, the loupe to his eye, watches in precise disorder in front of him—such minute mechanisms to measure the heartbeats of eternity.

"Just because," the boy answered him, while he listened to the ticking of clocks.

"You went hiking last week. Why don't you do something different for a change?" the petulance turning into a pointless irritability.

"Aw, last week we just went up to the Lodge. That wasn't nothing."

"Wasn't anything," Marjorie said absently.

(It was safe, though. Oh dear Lord, if they had only stayed at the Lodge, his son and the son of the man named Billings.)

"Well, where are you going this time?"

"To the top of the mountain. To the very top!"

It was not so much the words as the boy's intensity, the source of irritation yesterday, and remembered now with agony. Recognizing now the enormous vitality that had shone through a twelve-year-old's determination to reach the top. More than determination—aspiration. *Ad spirare, ad astra per aspera*. Reaching for stars.

Dear God, he cried in the hot silence of the cabin, let there be a miracle, let there be hope.

But the only answer was the ticking of his watch in that room of sleeping despair. And then he knew that God could work no miracle, that Christ-Billings would fail to save the sheep who had strayed beyond the fold of the safe, the circumspect.

And so sank into a pit, crushed by the weight of his last anguished question:

Was it true that only the small, the cautious, the moribund, had a chance to survive?