

What hides in the high grass

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Floating Robes Publishing

2010 – Free Download

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What hides in the high grass

As the sun set on the Dutch reclaimed lands, Sebastian watched it sink behind the horizon as if he was watching the sun sink into the North Sea. He sat back, leaning with his elbow on the rock hard soil at the edge of the tulip field, watching the sky turn purple and orange while the darkness conquered the lands from the east.

A slight breeze came from the west and he slowly closed his eyes and savoured the rich smell of pollen and blossoms as he felt the breeze go touch his face and going through his thick, black hair. In the distance he heard the birds heralding the end of day and the infrequent sound of flapping wings of bats as they darted across the nightly sky. His elderly face displayed a perfect smile of contentment as he let the breeze come over him. He waited until the golden globe was completely submerged behind the horizon and only the faint colourful glow lingered at the edge of the visible, before he got up.

As he was on his way home, there was a spring in his step. He was still smiling at the beautiful night as the stars and the moon shone down and a gentle breeze accompanied him along his way, blowing through the canopy of the beeches which grew along the side of the road. Sometimes he inhaled deeply to feel the fresh air get into his lungs and he exhaled through his mouth. He enjoyed these nights immensely as they are rare in these lands and only seem to exist in memory.

He was not too tall, but broad in the shoulders, betraying a lifetime of manual labour. His hairline was receding and what was left stood on end, thick with dust and sweat after the long day. His once white shirt now also bore the many stains of dirt and sweat as did his jeans. Slung over his shoulders was a small backpack that held his empty lunch box and bottle of water. The sweater which he wore in the morning when it was still pretty cold, was tied loosely around his waist. His face was aglow with a full day of catching the hot sun and the burned skin on his back was hurting, but inside he felt peaceful and filled with the satisfaction of a long day's work. He was tired now, and happy that tomorrow was Sunday and he didn't have to get up early.

He lived alone, in a small house that some would call a shack. It had three small rooms, a little gas stove that heated only the living room in winter. The rest of the rooms were generally the same temperature as the outside air. It was surrounded by a small patch of land where he grew tomatoes, spinach and carrots. Every morning he was greeted by a big, red tomcat that wanted food and occasionally would bring him dead mice or small rabbits. He loved it when in the morning, the sun would shine through his bedroom window and he knew it was going to be a beautiful day. In the evenings he liked to sit in the garden, drinking a beer, letting his thoughts run into weird and unknown places while watching hedgehogs scurry in the undergrowth and watching bats hunt mosquitoes in the warm summer air. It was his firm belief that people were as much a part of nature as any animal and enjoyed living that way.

He held steady employment at the farm and spent his evenings mostly reading. And although some would call his existence plain or boring or lacking ambition, he was happy with his peaceful days and had no idea what else he should want.

Strolling along the road, thinking about nothing in particular and just breathing the warm summer air, he watched the water birds floating in the canals and watched the sheep in the meadows as he wondered deeper and deeper into the rural lands.

And behind him, hidden in the shadows and obscured by the high grass, monsters followed in his wake.

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Although they were following him closely, the monsters kept a respectful distance, just lurking in the cover of the high grass. The moon was big and full and cast its silvery light on the flat lands, but they stayed in the shadows, moving from one to the other as Sebastian walked on. Being predators, they knew how to move as silently as possible, their padded paws avoiding breakable branches and crispy leaves. Some of them moved high up in the canopy of the beeches, from one branch to another, from tree to tree. Some of them scurried through the undergrowth and the bushes, pressing their white bellies close to the ground, watching Sebastian from behind the intricate

network of branches and leaves. Had he been able to see them, he would have noticed their slimy, moist skin, covered in wards and lesions. He would have seen the rows of sharp teeth gleaming in the moon light, the long, sharp claws digging into the bark of the trees and the big yellow eyes that burned with greed and hunger in their primeval mind.

Communicating with each other in a way that mere humans could not possibly perceive, they moved naturally as one continuous ripple through the night, hardly disturbing the natural order, only occasionally silencing the loud choir of grasshoppers or croaking frogs. They knew that the kill would benefit the entire pack. As Sebastian moved forward, so did the pack; when he held still, they froze in mid-motion, blending in perfectly with the odd mix of light and shadows.

They followed him for at least three kilometres as he strolled upright and confident down the straight and narrow *polder* road that led past an old farmhouse and finally ended at the lake.

The area around the old farmhouse was encased in darkness with just a little speck of light where the living room was. Passing it, Sebastian watched the dark silhouettes of farm machines and he smelled the stench of dung piled up next to the stables, waiting to be spread over the fields. The only sounds came from the stables where the cows moved lazily. Even as the monsters moved in the shadows, not even a slight rustle could be heard.

The full moon was poised over the horizon as Sebastian reached the lake. It

showed orange and red, still young as the sunlight died in the west. Black swallows swept over the lake, snatching minuscule bugs that hovered over the surface. Their wings made small ripples in the perfect mirror as they briefly touched the water. At the end of the day, with all of country life dying down, it was the perfect example of rural peace and quiet.

And as Sebastian stood still at the edge of the lake, with the stars pinned above him on the black sheet, he briefly closed his eyes for this ethereal moment and felt all his trivial thoughts and tensions drop away. All the while the monsters waited silently in the high grass.

Moments passed and then, as he opened his eyes again, he heard a small disturbance behind him. He briefly glanced around, let his eyes pass over the grass that already gathered dew and noticed the dark shapes hiding there. He briefly smiled and continued his walking.

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As Sebastian rounded the lake, he already heard the mopeds and loud voices of the teenagers breaking the silence of the evening. They played loud music from a radio or cassette player, upsetting all of nature and the wonderful state of mind he was in.

There were four of them, three boys and a girl. He was happy she was there, since they would not try anything with her around. The three boys were

smoking cigarettes and talking while the moped was still running. Two of them had dark hair, the one with the moped was blond. The girl clung to him, holding her cigarette and looking at her feet.

Sebastian knew his standing in the village. As a man living alone in a small house at the edge of civilization, he had a good idea how they saw him, if he could believe the gossip that now and then came to his attention. On some occasions children had yelled after him or thrown eggs at his house. But he never got angry, knowing it would only fuel their unholy glee. He mostly felt sorry for them.

As he approached them, he was suddenly ceased by a nagging feeling of insecurity, wondering if he had to greet them or not. Coming closer, he watched them, trying to decide if they were too involved in their conversation to pay any attention to him, or if they were just bored looking for some cheap thrills at his expense. The path along the lake was narrow here, and there was certainly not enough space to pass them unnoticed. With beeches on one side and the lapping water on the other, it was impossible to avoid each other. He decided to greet the youngsters.

And so he made eye contact with the young lad with the moped, sporting the disarming wide smile of the jolly farmer. With a twinkle in his eyes, he opened his mouth and let out a hearty “Good evening!”

The young blond boy was leaning with his arms on the handlebars of his moped, the cigarette hanging from his lips. He had a hard face with squinty

eyes and some lines that would only get deeper with age. As Sebastian greeted him, he only lifted up his chin. The two other boys quickly turned around as he approached and the girl looked up from her feet without lifting her head.

As soon as he stepped into their little circle and one of the dark-haired youngsters turned and blocked his way, Sebastian knew he had made an error in judgement. Both him and the dark-haired youngster looked over at the blond boy and watched him straighten up, displaying a playful grin as if his evening had suddenly become more interesting. The girl moved closer towards him, clinging to his arm ever tighter. As Sebastian stared into her weak eyes, he realized no help was to be expected from her.

“Come on, guys,” he said with a smile. “It’s a nice evening.”

“What do you mean?” the blond boy said, still holding the moped between his legs. He had taken the cigarette from his mouth and held it between his thumb and index finger, gesturing as he spoke. “We’re not doing anything. We’re just here, enjoying the view.”

He gestured wide at the lake before him and then put the cigarette between his lips again. The tip of it lit up in the darkness as he dragged on it. He exhaled grinning. The two other youngsters chuckled briefly, while the girl gnawed at her nail.

“Just enjoying the view...” Sebastian repeated. “Good, you won’t mind if I’ll be on my way, then?” He quickly took a step forward, trying to avoid the dark-haired young man who still stood in front of him. Suddenly a hand was placed

on his chest, pushing him back.

“Don't do that,” Sebastian said, looking up at the dark-haired boy.

“We'll do whatever we want, old man,” the blond guy said.

“Does he always speak for you?” he asked the dark-haired boy in front him. He looked the young boy boldly into his eyes, but the boy just looked back at him, grinning defiantly. For a short moment, nobody said anything. A heron flew out from between the reeds and made its flapping exit but the young man never wavered, staring back into Sebastian's unblinking eyes.

“You are one of Pieter Mulder's boys, aren't you?” Sebastian asked and suddenly doubled up losing the strength in his legs as the young boy punched him in the stomach. As his knees landed on the rock hard ground and his forehead touched the dewy grass, he heard the boys cheer and the girl let out a little shriek.

One of them yanked the backpack off his shoulders as he lay on the ground and he heard it being ripped open. His lunch box and the bottle fell to the ground.

“There's no money!” one of the boys yelled at him.

“Come on,” he heard the blond boy say, “let's get him.”

Regaining some of his strength, Sebastian lifted himself up from the ground, holding his stomach, and through his tearing eyes he watched the threesome coming at him. Suddenly he felt very vulnerable and he braced himself for what was to come. But what was to come, never came.

Silently at first but growing louder with each passing moment, a strange clicking sound rose up from the high grass and the beeches all around them. A slight rustle sounded behind Sebastian as one of the reptilian monsters came forward. It was standing on its hind legs, its big, yellow eyes trained on the three boys, grinning wide and clicking its formidable jaws in a maddening rhythm.

Sebastian watched the monster as it clumsily took some deliberate steps forward and the boys instinctively took a step back. The incessant clicking grew louder, like the singing of the grasshoppers on an innocent summer night. The creature moved past Sebastian, never taking its eyes off the three confused boys.

“What is that?” the blond boy asked stupidly. For another moment nature seemed to hold its breath. Then it came alive in a storm of claws and teeth and blood.

The monsters jumped up from the high grass and descended from the trees. They dropped from the foliage like ticks and sank their chattering teeth in the supple flesh of the youngsters. Their claws dug deep into their weak bellies and came up filled with blood and mushy entrails. The green grass turned red and the blood ran like a narrow brook into the lake. For one short moment the night was torn apart by the last frantic screams of the girl as the monsters yanked at her long, blond hair and tore her neck open with a sickening ripping

sound. The blood gushed over her shirt as three of the monsters cracked her skull open and picked her brain while her eyes stared vacantly at the full moon. And while the monsters still feasted on the mangled bodies, old man Sebastian got up from the ground, rubbing his stomach, and grabbed his backpack. With some effort he put back his bottle and his lunch box. Glancing over the bloody scene, he let his gaze slide over the lake and he inhaled deeply the sweet night air, reminding himself that nature could be cruel as well as beautiful. Still turned towards the lake, eyes closed, he said a silent prayer for the youngsters and then quietly made his way home.

Word by the author

At the end of 2009, nearing completion of my first short story collection 'Beneath Dark Waters', I went for an evening walk. I was quite pleased with the progress I'd made, but still missed one or two stories that I could use as 'fillers'. I had enough 'heavy' stories, but needed something 'light' and humorous.

During my walk I glanced over at the group of youngsters that are always there. The faces may change, but 10 years ago that had been me, just hanging out with some friends, shooting the breeze, watching the grown-ups walking their dog or taking a normal stroll. Other than in this story, they let me pass.

Later on I thought of the idea of a smug, self-assured man who is master over a host of monsters. This seemed like an interesting idea and I tried to create a story around it. The walk and the youngsters just sort of popped up. The self-assured man made place for Sebastian, the simple farm help, since it worked better with the idea of needing to be protected.

In fact, the story worked so well, I gave it the honorary place as the closer of the collection, hopefully leaving people with a justified sense of horror.

I hope you liked this one. If you did, check out the rest of the collection at www.floatingrobes.com.