

Joseph D. Williams returns with his second collection of short stories, featuring "All the Way Down", "The Other End of the Room", and many more.

The Midnight Disease

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The Midnight Disease

Joseph D. Williams

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THE WOLVES

He'd been home three months before the nightmares began, and that might have been a blessing if they didn't stay long. But once they came, they wouldn't stop. They were like vultures, scavenging for what little life could be drawn out of him once time and distance had taken their fill. They were eager to stain their mouths, to pick through the meat of him and growl in his face, and then to drink him up, senseless and savage, until they had full mouths and full bellies. But first, they waited, because it would be better for them that way. They waited to see his hand limp with submission, calling to them, so they'd know he was ripe for the plucking.

He would wake in a cold bedroom on the second floor of his childhood home with his knuckles powder-white and his stomach clenched, sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was thousands of miles away, and even more certain that the wolves were coming to pick him clean. He could feel them watching him from the shadows.

Most nights, he was able to stand up, take a deep breath, stumble out to the bathroom in his pajamas, put his mouth under the faucet for a drink, and then drift his way down the hall and back to bed. By the time he laid his head down, the nightmares were usually forgotten, and he would be able to fall asleep so long as he didn't catch himself in the mirror. But if he did, it would be days. If he did, all he could think about were the faces watching him sleep from the shadows, waiting for him to ripen.

He let Annabelle sleep, partly because he was terrified to acknowledge the stalking predators in his bedroom, and partly because they had only been together for two months. He envied the way she slept. He liked to watch

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her and imagine that he was the one with careless, quivering eyes, dreaming that he was late for school though school had let out many years ago, or that he was reuniting with a lover he'd somehow lost along the way. Sometimes watching her so peaceful like that was comforting enough that he wouldn't have to leave the room at all to shake his nightmares. He just closed his eyes and he was gone again. It was his secret.

If she stayed over and he woke with the wolves closing in on him, their cool breath gripping his neck and their drool simmering over his crumpled sheets, he would go down to the living room and look out the window at the foggy pre-dawn, rocking back and forth in a chair his parents had bought for his nursery before he was born. His parents seldom woke from his footsteps or his rocking over the creaking wood of the old house, and when they did, they didn't seem to notice or care that Annabelle was over. He was old enough to make his own choices. She was always gone in the morning before his parents had a chance to inquire of her, and he didn't talk to them much anymore, anyway.

Tonight was different.

He'd fallen asleep heavily, his blood thick with alcohol, Annabelle thick with sharp perfume and vodka on her breath that washed over him so completely that he felt like vomiting. They'd had a fight at the bar because they drank too much and he was tipping the bartender a little too handsomely, which on most occasions would have been encouraged because Annabelle had been a bartender herself in her early twenties and she knew how hard it was to pay bills. But they were both drunk, irritable, and the bartender happened to be an attractive young blonde. Annabelle was no longer young, and her hair was

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stubbornly brunette no matter how many times she highlighted.

They made a scene of it in front of the whole Thursday night crowd, and he didn't usually make scenes anywhere.

Eventually, Annabelle had broken down into tears and he had apologized, more because he felt bad that she was crying than he actually believed he'd done something wrong.

"It's all right," she told him. "I'm just drunk."

He thought he loved her for that. He'd been afraid to tell her so. He'd only been back for three months, and he thought he might be confused because she was the first woman he'd been with in more than three years.

They walked back through the streets of the small town until they reached the first line of houses. By then, the alcohol had begun to wear off, from the fight and from getting his blood flowing, and he was embarrassed enough to take her hand beneath the orange streetlights. Annabelle did not speak because she was drunk and focused on making it back to the house without upchucking or saying something she wouldn't say otherwise, and she almost laughed in spite of herself when she realized that both were really the same thing, deep down.

The wind was light and stuck to their skin like sap. There was an orange half-moon that blended gracefully, seamlessly, with the orange streetlights, and he wondered if the moon and the air and the woman would look just like that anywhere else in the world, or was it just in this small town on this night. He shivered because the alcohol was wearing off. She stumbled because it hadn't.

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They reached the front-porch of his parents' home, and he stopped Annabelle before she could step any further.

"What is it?" she said cautiously.

He exhaled.

"Johnny, I've gotta get inside. I'm not feeling so good." Annabelle winced and bent over anxiously, as if that alone would keep her stomach from spilling all over the summer night.

He nodded and straightened her out. She eyed him, unsure of his intentions but not entirely alarmed. He brushed her hair from her mouth and kissed her softly, letting his lips linger on hers until he saw that her eyes had closed, and then he pulled away.

"Okay," he whispered, and led her up the steps.

She stared at him thoughtfully as he held the back door open for her, but Annabelle said nothing then, and she wouldn't for a while. She was asleep as soon as she hit the bed, not bothering to change, brush her teeth, or even slip under the covers, and he followed not long after.

In his dream, he was on the other side of the world, and it was very cold. The hills sloped and wrinkled the landscape around him, and the same orange half-moon of the small town hung precariously close to the edge of a cliff over a mighty ocean of nothing. He was all alone out in the wastelands, with no streetlights and no weapons and no clothing to guard him. It was worse than the memory. He curled up into the fetal position and tried not to groan.

He'd always hated being naked in that biting wind, and yet it was waiting for him every time he fell asleep, waiting whether he was ready for it or not. It sunk its teeth in wherever it wandered, be it arm or leg or face or thigh,

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and he could feel that the wolves were somewhere in the great expanse of black and red and orange, barring their own teeth and waiting for their turn; waiting for him to let his guard down for just a moment, or to fall asleep so they could see his hand limp with submission. The great beckoning. Like vultures. They hated to see him spoiled by the wind.

He would stay that way because there was nothing else that he could do. Eventually, he knew, they would be bold and circle around him, growling, showing their incisors, their ears straight and their hind legs locked. The wind would pick up and the moon would topple over the edge of the cliff, shaking the earth like Atlas had sneezed his Olympian sneeze.

Then, they'd come.

He'd tried to get away before, but nothing had ever worked. The landscape was a long plateau with nothing but craters and the subtle rises that formed barren hilltops, but there was no place to hide. They'd be on him soon.

He trembled and felt tears threatening to stain his cheeks, but he made sure they didn't break, because that would only bring the wolves closer. That would only admit defeat. He was cowering into himself, but that was at least better than lying on his back and showing them his underbelly.

The sand prickled like whiskers against his bare skin. The moon climbed back up to the top of the cliff where it resumed its peculiar perch, this time swearing to keep its feet held and its knees locked so it never humpty-dumptyed again. The wind died and rose once more like a new rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouching towards Bethlehem to be born.

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He shivered.

The wolves came.

He heard their paws pattering along in the sand no more than a dozen meters away, and he wondered how they could have made it so far from his childhood home, half the world away, without the benefit of dreaming. The noises rising from their chests touched him everywhere. He was afraid to even glance up at them, terrified that he'd end up looking straight into their eyes. He wasn't sure what would happen if he did, but he had a dreadful certainty that it wouldn't be a dream anymore if he aligned himself with their hungry stares.

Their steps were slow at first, but the closer they came, the bolder they were, until he could hear them wrestling each other, ravenously, for the first go at his all-you-can-eat buffet.

The winner crashed into his side too soon, and the others were able to leap onto its back and pin it to the ground without much trouble, so that they could take his spot at the table and, likewise, be replaced by those who followed. There was an endless chorus of growling and whimpering and slathering all around him that chilled his heart, and that was all there was before the first bite had sunk into his back, then his leg, then his forearm. They always went for the same spots. They always went for his scars, as if nowhere else on his body had been opened for them.

For an incalculable amount of time, they took their turns, ripping the flesh from his bones and picking through his muscles, at first voraciously, then more reserved and speculative, which was even more terrifying than the rage that first set them on him. He cried out over and over again, but the pain was more of a dull ringing

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throughout his body than the localized, piercing tears he was used to, and it felt wrong to scream without the tears. He would still feel the ringing when he woke up. He wasn't sure which he preferred.

When they finished, they skulked away into the darkness with their tails swishing contentedly across the sand, wiping away their tracks.

When they finished, he awoke.

It wasn't a violent lurch that sent him upright, gasping. He wasn't in a cold sweat and breathing heavily, like people always did in the movies after a nightmare. He was just cold. It was a slow waking, and that was almost more terrible because he was thinking clearly by the time he opened his eyes, and that was when he saw their shining teeth in the mirror, their glowing eyes, in the shadows, all around him, ready to turn his nightmares, his memories, into a new reality. Ready to reopen the scars up and down his body and mind, in case he ever forgot where he came from; in case he ever forgot that they would always be watching him from the shadows and the mirrors.

Most nights, he could walk out and put his mouth under the bathroom faucet. Most nights, he could go sit in the rocking chair and watch until the world lit up around him like he was the one driving the Chariot of Fire. Most nights, he didn't need anyone. But this night was different.

This night, he did.

"Anna," he whispered.

She did not wake.

He gripped her shoulder and nudged her gently, his eyes squeezed tightly shut all the while.

"Annabelle," he said.

She did not wake.

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He heard a growl building from the closet and the blood retreated from his toes and fingers. The dull ringing echoed through his body. He swallowed back tears.

“Annabelle!” he pleaded.

She woke.

He opened his eyes.

There was a moment, as she looked around the bedroom in an impermeable fog, when he thought she would fall right back asleep and that he’d be all alone to face the wolves just like before, but then their eyes met and she touched his face with clumsy, swollen fingers.

“What’s wrong, Johnny?”

His tongue was frozen in his mouth. His eyes were wide.

“Did someone break in?”

He shook his head. It was difficult to hold the tears back now that she was fully awake and consoling him.

“Have a bad dream?” she mocked.

He nodded slowly, feeling like a child.

Her thin smile evaporated and she nuzzled into his neck.

“It’s all right.”

She kissed his cheek.

“I love you, Anna,” he said.

She sat up in bed with her eyebrows raised. After a few moments, “I love you too, John.” She looked down into her fingers. “I’m sorry about before.”

He did not smile, nor did he act surprised. He pulled her back down to the bed and wove their hands together.

“Stay with me every night. Don’t leave me alone.”

She shuffled a few inches away from him, still gripping his hand tightly.

“Really?”

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He paused and looked into the dresser-mirror at the foot of the bed.

“Yeah.”

“Every night? At your parents’?” she asked again in disbelief.

Black eyes stared back at him. The wolves of his silences whispered from every corner of the room. They were closing in.

He swallowed.

“Please. Until the wolves go away.”

She was quiet for a moment. Then, “Okay.”

She watched him struggle back into the sheets and turn away from her, then she kissed his cheek and held him until he fell asleep, not sure exactly what he was talking about or whether or not he really meant it, but not too concerned either way. She knew well that men say strange things in the night, in the dark, surrounded by nothing but wolves and mirrors.

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