

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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Nightmare Call

An Off - Trail Story

by Carol Emshwiller

(author of "Bingo and Bongo")

There's pain, fear, anxiety about Asdsa, beloved, and impatience to be on the way. A claw is hurt and cilia are gone. The ship is caught, stuck fast, imbedded.

Suppress it, the pain, imbeddedness, even Asdsa, beloved. Concentrate. There is a creature out there not too far. It

HE HELD the gun lightly and walked with a brisk, angry purpose. He wasn't going any-comes nearer and it is big and brained. It could do it, free the ship.

Suppress, concentrate and call.

where except away, away from the cabin, away from the river, away from the trees, away from... thought.

He stepped quietly on the peat-like ground of the forest and suddenly came to a small clearing. There, a few yards ahead, was a doe. She turned big eyes to stare at him, eyes that were calm with forest calmness, yet alert with a trust-in-nothing look. He stared back, seeing the bare patch on her neck where the skin showed through, and even the lump, like a cyst, on one cheek.

Her eyes were brown like Mona's.

He raised the gun in a swift arc, aimed for a moment between those wide-set, brown eyes, but he hesitated and the doe ran. He saw the white tailed rump disappear behind the tree trunks and he shot two savage shots at a birch tree.

"Come back," he whispered. "Mona, come back."

Suppress, concentrate and call.

"Help!"

FOR ONLY an instant the cry was in his mind. Then a grey curtain came down shutting it out, forgetting it, as if the mind refused to believe in such a thing as a call inside it but from the outside. But the call was there, and the mind retreated farther...

"Help!"

It receives and yet can't. Its mind folds in grey and in a dream. Is it no use?

"Help! Help!"

Is it no use then? And Asdsa, beloved, are we lost to each other? Will I ever come to you?

"Please help!"

...retreated farther into grey and dream.

He was in a tropical swamp with mud—thick, oily mud—up over his knees and he was struggling to go forward. He could only go a few inches at each step, even pulling on vines and tangled roots. That was bad enough, but there was a nightmare creature sitting on his shoulder, a mud-covered thing that whispered obscenities in his ear and told him he'd never get out. It pushed on his head and pulled at his neck with its slimy, saliva covered hands; it wanted him to sink altogether into the mud and not come up ever again. Then it got him around the neck, shutting off his wind. He clawed at it, but it was slippery and held fast; he couldn't breathe. He would go down. He tried to call out for help but his voice wasn't even a whisper... "Help! Help!"

"Help!"

HHE WOKE from the dream gasping and fell forward,

leaning his shoulder against a tree. The forest was the same. Something scampered on a branch above him. A crow flew by, cawing; the mossy ground beneath him was damp, but firm.

Trembling, he lit a cigaret. Words like nervous breakdown, schizophrenia, insanity, came to him. Words he had used often enough, but never really understood the meaning in terms of actual sickness and torment. They were only words now, revealing nothing.

He waited for the trembling and dizziness to stop.

Time heals everything, that's what they said. Things had been bad. (Bad enough to make his mind split in two? Bad enough for one part to go off into nightmare and the other into this dizzy reality?) Still, he was counting on time; he had only to be strong now and not think—especially not think. He would do that later, plumb the darkness of his mind when it was not so terrifyingly empty.

He got up, took up the gun, and thought momentarily of Mona. He had gone, yes, but she had driven him away, and he wasn't coming back.

"Next time I see that doe," he muttered, "I won't miss."

even after these days of unaccustomed exercise. The darkness around him opened the eyes of his mind and, though he tried not to, sometimes he thought the things that were not to be thought of any more.

Mona and he had come here together once, when the marriage was new. Some of the best times were at twilight. The canoe was watertight then, and they drifted down the river almost every evening forgetting about supper until afterwards. This was the time when animals came out to wash and drink and swim. They watched muskrats mating as they swam and heard the slap of beavers' tails.

And the nights...each one brought something new between them.

It was just as well the canoe leaked now.

A half-sleep came at last, a sleep with muttering and turning over. The pillow was lumpy and smelled of mould; the bed was too flat and board-hard. But at last after the half sleep came the full sleep for he had walked all day.

The creature's mind has relaxed into a soft blackness, vulnerable, open. This is another time to try.

"Help!"

It was the swamp again, but worse this time. The thing on his back was bigger; its weight

NIGHTS were the worst. Sleep was hard coming,

sank him up to his waist. Its hands were clawed now, and blood came where ever it touched. He struggled forward and it pulled back.

Through the dream is the only way, but can it work with a mind like this, so dangerous the creature can drown in its own greyness; and then there will be nothing left and no hope, neither for it nor for Asdsa, beloved.

Yet it's the only one here that can. Enter once and see.

THERE was something new, an island of dryness, safety, there in front of him. Only a few yards to go. And on it, was it Mona? She was white and changed. Was it her arm that ended in a large lobster claw, or was there a shadowy lobster shape behind her waving a bent antenna. Yes, hideous but not slimy with mud.

There's brotherhood and love even between us. Open your mind. Let me come in. Don't be afraid to lose a little of yourself. You do not need it all. I, too, lose some. Don't be afraid to hear me, for I need help, too.

Was it Mona or the lobster shape that talked like that? Anyway, he wasn't making any headway at all. He was struggling with everything he had, but he was still too far away. He was tiring, too, and the

monster knew it. It leaned from one side to the other; it jumped and pulled at him. He was going down. The sharp claws dug into his shoulder and raked his jaw. He screamed to the lobster thing and to Mona. "Help! Help!"

"Help!"

Was he really screaming, or was it someone else?

The sky was just beginning to grey. He got up shakily. He was dressed except for pants and shoes. He pulled them on and then went to the table to pump and light the tiny, one burner stove. He needed a cup of coffee. He would be all right after that. Lord, what a dream!

He ate nothing; there was a greater need in him. The need to hunt and stalk and most of all to shoot a big animal, a doe with brown eyes.

HE TOOK up his gun, his cartridge belt and jacket. He stopped at the door, thinking he ought to take a sandwich; but then he turned and went on out into the cold morning without bothering. Eating was a thing people sat down to three times a day; they started with tomato juice and ended with apple pie. The same old things, over and over again; it was a senseless habit.

He took the same way as the day before. The sun came

up in orange and red and then rose higher, fading the colors until nothing was left but itself. It got hotter. He no longer felt the feverish excitement of the morning. Now there was a sick determination that squeezed his mouth tight and made the muscles bunch in his arms and legs.

He found her, the same one, eating the leaves of a young tree by the side of a tiny stream. He raised the gun slowly and aimed deliberately. The sights danced over her brown-grey body. He braced against a tree, silently cursing the trembling that had come to him. He aimed for the head and pulled the trigger.

"Help! Help!"

Vaguely he heard a shot and it seemed a doe cried out with the voice of a woman; and then there was the hot mud again, and it was worse, much worse.

MONA WAS there and the lobster thing, the hideous, beautiful lobster thing, but he would never be able to reach them. The demon on his shoulders was so heavy it was all he could do just to hold it up and to hold his head out of the mud that was close about his chest.

"Why do you hate yourself so?"

Was it the lobster speaking?

(But I don't hate myself.)

"We do not do so. Rather do we do or undo the thing that will take the hate away."

The words seemed to make the monster on his shoulders furious. It screamed and jumped and tore at him. Now he would surely sink.

"Fight, fight. You must not lose."

And he fought. The sweeping claws raked him. Sometimes he took great mouthfuls of mud or water, but he fought. He fought until the monster was torn from his shoulder, until they were face to face and he was breathing its foul breath.

"Look at its face. Look. And it wants you dead."

It was covered with mud. How could he see the face, only that it was ugly. The whites of the eyes showed, and the cleaner streaks on its chin where it drooled, but how could he see? And yet he had to.

HE SWUNG his elbow across the evil face and half the cheek and forehead were cleaned. He froze then, and it froze too; he stared at the grimacing, evil, proud face. And he screamed because it was a face that denied tenderness and love and all softness.

Then, before his eyes it shrank and melted until there

was nothing left but the mud.

It was himself he had seen, as if in a warped mirror, himself that he hated and fought.

"Help!"

Something called him.

He woke to the holding of a gun and a dead doe before him. The empty blackness of his mind was not empty after all and never had been. It was full of soft whiteness, open, vulnerable, but loving.

He knelt beside the doe and cried for it, and for Mona, and for himself. And while he cried

he knew that when the time for crying was over he would go and help the one who had called him. It was a small one trapped in a small thing and it would be simple to help it with a pulley and a rope. And then he would go back to his home and to Mona.

He had gone with bitter pride, wanting to hurt her and to hurt himself; but he would come back full of new things, to Mona, beloved.

