

## In the Night

a short story by Jessica Seawright

It was the warmest December night our small-town campus had seen in a long time and everyone decided to go out and celebrate. We didn't get much heat, let alone a day where there wasn't snow up to your shoulders outside your front door, so warm fresh air was something you just couldn't pass up.

Instead of being cooped up in my dorm room binge watching *The Office* yet another night, I decided to head out to the only real bar on campus. This semester I did what I do best, isolate myself in the name of self-care, so I didn't have many friends to call at the last minute to go out with.

I threw on my favorite velvet sweater and a pair of blue jean shorts I hadn't worn out of the house since I'd been here and made my way to the "heart" of campus.

O'Hannagans was especially crowded tonight just as I'd suspected. It was packed out with people like me looking to get out of their rooms and socialize for the night. The bar reeked of old stale beer and sleazy college guys that spent a little too much time spraying on cologne to impress the ladies.

A group of rowdy guys in baseball jerseys near the back caught my eye as some old rock song played on the jukebox and I considered turning around and going back home. Is this what my social life's come to? Trading in countless episodes of *Steve Carell* for a moldy old bar?

I lucked up on a seat at the bar where there wasn't a gross suspicious sticky spot and waited around for the knowingly impossible moment the bartender noticed me sitting without a drink.

The bustling sounds of the bar filled my ears as more and more people spilled in from off the streets.

"Aspen?" a familiar voice called out from behind me.

I turned to see Jackson, a guy from my chemistry class I flirted with from time to time, walking towards me with a beer in one hand and a pool stick in the other.

I hadn't really taken the time to look at him before, but in the dim light of the bar his sapphire blue eyes shined and twinkled with a mischievous glint as he walked closer to me. He was tall, so tall that if he stood on his tippy toes, I'm sure his messy brown hair would kiss the ceiling.

“I’ve never seen you here before,” He mused, “What’s a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this?”

Was I really in the mood to engage in playful banter with him tonight? Not really, but there wasn’t much else to do other than count the peanuts in the dish in front of me.

I smiled and cocked my head to the side lightheartedly, “Really? That’s the best you’ve got?”

He extended the pool stick he was holding out to me. “Wanna play? I’ll go easy on ya.”

My immediate reaction was to say no, but I’d come out tonight to “have fun” so why not play along with the plans that fate set out for me?

I jumped up from the bar stool and took hold of the cue. “More like I’ll go easy on you.”

He let go and we made our way to the old pool table in the back of the bar. “Loser buys the winner beer,” He called out in that raspy voice of his, a smirk playing on the edge of his mouth.

“Well you’ll be waiting a year for that beer seeing as I’m only 20.”

“What are you drinking then?”

“Nothing yet,”

He gasped, throwing a hand over his heart in fake awe. “You can’t play pool sober, I think that’s against the rules.”

He cracked open one of his beers and handed it to me. “It’s an acquired taste. If you don’t like it, I can get you something else.”

I raised it to my mouth and took a big gulp. A strong bittersweet taste overcame my mouth and I held back the urge to spit it out.

“Good?” He laughed, watching me struggle to swallow the gross drink.

I couldn’t help the cough that escaped my mouth, “Mhmm.”

He watched me like a hawk as I nodded and bent over the old felted table to line the balls up in the triangular rack.

“You go first, stud.”

He smiled showing no teeth and picked up the stick nearest to him. He circled the table, stopping only inches away from me. Leaning down, making sure to brush his legs against my bare ones, he hit the center ball, making the ball spread across the table. He lined up another shot, only to miss when I rubbed my leg into his.

He glanced down at me in disbelief as I laughed, taking the stick from his big hands.

“Oh, so that’s how we’re gonna play?”

The rest of the night was filled with lots of beer, loud laughter, and shameless flirting. I had just won for the second time against him, when he pulled me into his body, his warm chest pressing into my front.

“What do you say we get out of here, huh? I know this great diner a block or two away that serves the best burgers.”

I don’t know if it was the beer or just being so close to him but for some reason I nodded my head yes and watched as he grabbed his jacket from the edge of the pool table.

His hand wrapped around mine and for the first time in a long time, I felt happy.

The crisp night air attacked me as we walked out, and I couldn’t help the wave of heat that overcame my body.

I fidgeted with my sweater, suddenly wishing I’d thrown on a t-shirt instead. “It’s really hot out tonight.”

“Yeah, I think we’re just not used to the warm air,” He chuckled, turning to face me.

In the dark of the night, I caught a nervous look in his eyes.

As he brushed a stray curly lock of hair away from my face, his hand lingered on my cheek and he leaned in closer to me.

Just as I closed my eyes and tilted my head forward, someone came rushing into us, at full speed, and we stumbled back away from each other.

“Run!”

Jackson was about as confused as I as he looked behind me to see what the commotion was about. Whatever he saw must have scared him too, because something overcame his face and he grabbed my hand and pulled me off with him.

Next thing I knew we were running. From what? I had no idea. But when you see someone running, fear and horror in their eyes, the smart thing to do is run along with them.

“Aspen!” Jackson suddenly came to a stop in front of me and his grip on my hand tightened.

That’s when I saw it. This huge black monstrous thing stood a few feet ahead of us, roaring and crackling like the fire inside was dying to come out. Its body resembled an erupting volcano and I watched as this thing tore through people like a child opening their presents on Christmas morning.

Another scream ripped through the silence of the night and my eyes zeroed in on a girl being ripped in half by the animal with teeth sharper than a new razor.

I found myself glued to the spot, my feet unable to move. The world around me moved in slow motion as I watched people run in all directions in search of safety.

“Aspen, we’ve gotta go, now!” Jackson yelled, pulling on my arm until I snapped out of the trance and began to run beside him.

Jackson was gripping my hand as I pushed my body into matching his long-legged strides. We finally came back to the bar only to see it desolate. Lights out, windows shattered, blood and dismembered limbs strewn in the parking lot.

How did we end up here? Somehow, I knew that after tonight nothing would be the same. There would be no waking up for class in the morning and no more late nights studying last minute before a test.

It was crazy to think that yesterday I was worried about such trivial things and now we were in a fight for our lives and it was either run or be killed.

We chose to run.