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Night Terrors

by *Stephon Senegal*

Dark. Those nights were dark. I would walk out the house and hurry to the light switch. A quick reprieve before we hit the streets. A welcomed transition and break from the dark. My cousin would have already arrived. It was his knock that prompted the exit. "The light switch was right there", I thought. But he would not touch. Standing there. Menacing, faintly impatient. The family peeps always felt tougher or at least meaner. Fifth grade. I was only a hare pass ten. Tense from his stare. Not the cousins. But fear. *It* told me things. My night lamp was intermission. A hall pass from *its* teachings. Some veneers we need. It was an old lamp. Metal probably. A felt bottom. I got it one evening helping my mother with her cleaning duties. She cleaned offices on Mondays and Wednesdays. I liked the shape. The top had a round canopy and a bulb fitted underneath. The switch was on the base. I think she had grown tired of me using the ceiling light. This was the compromise. Often the little cousin or nephew. Finding fondness in the underestimation. Things I excelled at, the familial peers cared little about. Back then at least. Things they did well. They pounded. Boastful. Our people prized. Savored the contest. Foot races or wrestling matches. Opportunities to perform were relished. It was how we belonged. The competition connected us. We sharpened each other. I remember the feeling of besting them at their games. Winded and victorious. One time was enough. I did not need to beat them often. This was practice after all, not revolution.

The ride that evening had no particular purpose. Tales of mischief. A smidgen. Suitable portion for our age. Carnalities demand rehearsal. Adult precursors. Our bicycles were hand-me-downs. Ten speeds. Do not recall how we got those bikes. But they were gone years later. I had a white one. They were someones. Just not ours. He took off first. Into the street. Fearless and fast. No pausing. They relished the dark. My cousins. I paused at the edge for us both. At the driveways brink. Flanking the road, peeking right then left. This was not my first, but alas me et fear had agreements. Pausing once more to steady myself before the rodeo. One foot on. A hurried inspection of the pedals. Pushing off. I went. Slipping. Off balance. Cruising as I steadied the bike. Not wanting him to notice. Calming myself as the left pedal did its spinning. Carefully getting the other foot on. Glancing up and down to see if he was paying any attention. Revolving. Patience. *It* whispered. The pedal. Taking its sweet time. I did not want the shins beat up again. So, I waited.

Outside. Air felt different. Empty. Bright stars. A cauldron of possibilities. No rules. No boundaries. Only imagination and *its* thorns. Temptation. Such is adventure, both prickly and plausible. In rural Louisiana there were not many street lamps. And yet the air was vivid. Even in the evening. Grasping to take in its expanse. Spiraling faster. If only you could hold. But somehow it kept an arms length. Proverbial bait. Leading us to.

The lights. They came in twos. Unfriendly. Hearing their trucks. Rumbling in the approach. To them. We were out of place. Armed with wannabe suppositions. Misplaced creeds. They assumed the road theirs. Dawn or dusk. A special place for them. And them alone. Autonomous and pale. Tyrants. Fancying themselves such. Riding waves of forgone cruelties. They came as suddenly as their glances. Headlamps hitting our bodies. Driving on those dark roads. We were no different than animals to them. Piercing. Glowing. Deuces. There we were. Out of the darkness. Dogged. Slippery. Gone. They felt the stillness in those seconds. It made them uneasy. How could we be out. Where were our caretakers. Had not we been warned. Funny. I had the same questions. They were not concerned for our bodies. But our defiance. It was our mettle that pained them. It was the missed opportunity to do away with a brave one. They knew we were preparing. Prepping for a time when the lights would be barrels.

In that environment we went by feel. I remember the wind. Not like the winds now. At least not here, not yet. The chills in the middle of summer. There were other *things* in the air. Fear teaches for an exchange. Accomplice or not, you were not alone. You trusted your companion to keep you whole. Roads had no sidewalks. Dual lanes. One for each way. And the ditches of course. They were deep. Especially when it rained. My cousins rode with traffic. I rode against. They would look over. Shaking their heads. Slightly begrudged and amused. They became accustomed. For me it just made more sense to see the danger. See it coming. To look at them. Dare them. An American south. The carport light was dim from this distance. I thought. Best to stay ready.

Dark, but not too dark. The Flats. Our version of city. Hood. Country hood. Unlike my nights in Brooklyn now. The houses were more spread out there, back when. Nights with this cousin were different from the others. Slightly ominous. Measuring our worth in how we moved. Stillness was for the pubescent. He was a minute past fourteen. A year older. I would make up for that year, in spades. Robust instruction. Late night trips. Houston and back before dawn. This part of town had houses and street lamps. We choose to walk that night as we did most nights we were out together. I looked up to him in a weird way. One of the rougher amongst us. Not the oldest, but typically the first to test murkier waters. He was one of my first fights or at least the one that left a lasting memory. Stout and thickly muscled. The first part of the oxbow was dark. As we neared the corner you saw the first street lamp. Like a tall giraffe. Dusty pewter. Peering. It was nearby this one house, often vacant but occasionally occupied. Those kids did not come out much. Regardless of the year or the family. It was one of our markers and intermittent chill spots. We would know when another family moved in if our uncles stopped using the yard for car repairs. Either way, occupied or not, we would sit on that driveways edge. Sometimes using their roof for one of our games. Not sure of the name. It involved a fluorescent ball, the one with the grey lines, two players and a rooftop. No tennis courts on our side of town. One family stayed in the corner house for four months. Longer than usual. The adjacent street was the one that entered our neighborhood. Around that corner the street got a little darker. Some of my uncles were carpenters. They all seemed pretty handy in one way or another. Like them, this cousin kept tools. I felt safe. Strangely. Our conversations were broad. Brooding. Spiritual even. We talked in depth about religion and what the night did to us during those walks. Especially what it did to him. The dark spots. No street lamps. Those parts of the conversation were most intense. Surveying our path, he would rarely look back. I somehow clung to that detail. Its nuance held something. A notion that for him. Possibly. There was nothing to return to. In those minutes. Revealing our innermost thoughts. Pausing under street lamps. Silenced beneath their gaze. Aware of their scrutiny. We would wait. Big brother was not really a thing, or at least not there. Not then. I guess we understood what would come. Walking the neighborhood, he would sometimes say "one-sec cuz". That was a cue to stay put for a minute, keep watch but keep distance. He would take a quick leave and walk to the strangers we encountered on the streets. He was careful not to involve me in those conversations. I thank him for that. Our guardians remembered. Conversely, we knew things. They were made to forget. Nonetheless. Watching the areas adjacent. Playing pseudo bodyguard. He understood those blocks. Bravado falsettos. Precursor to stranger days. Best to have tools....to fix things.