

## The Witching Hour

A young woman clings to the steering wheel of a car. Her knuckles are cracked. The skin around them is threaded with red. She ignores how they sting but there's an acidity building in her stomach she can't ignore. She reaches for the bottle of Pepto in the duffel bag beside her and takes a swig. She doesn't have time to pull over.

She looks at the dashboard clock. It is 3:42 am. The Witching Hour. Her grandmother used to warn her not to stay out until the Witching Hour. Strange occurrences abound during the Witching Hour, that time of night when the veil is thin and magical beings who love nothing more than causing mischief in the lives of men, make themselves known. But who gives a shit about mischief in the lives of men? Of him.

By the time the sun rises all traces of those creatures are lost. The only evidence of their magic is an accident here, something or *someone* missing there.

Thanks to the rain, the stretch of road ahead of her is polished obsidian glass. It is completely fathomless except for the glowing yellow of lane markings. The mist ahead soaks up the light from her already dim headlights, obscuring the path forward. Her path away from him. She can barely see more than 100 feet ahead, but that's all she needs. 100 ft, 200 ft. Soon it's a mile, 2 miles, 50 miles. She turned off the GPS a while ago. It's useless in finding her destination. Instead, she follows the yellow lines and dashes. They are straight, unerring. They won't lead her astray. Not like him. Not like the house she had just escaped and its unnerving familiarity.

Music bumps softly from her speakers, nearly indiscernible. It tries to dampen her sense of urgency, but her body is still tense. Cortisol and adrenaline are still pumping through her veins

making her twitch and her breathing shallow. She has to keep moving. She has to keep putting distance behind her until he's faded away, not even a shadow can be left in her mind.

She glances at the passenger seat. Blood speckles the tan canvas of her duffel bag. She didn't realize how much there was. She didn't think he would hear her. She didn't hear him. He was supposed to be asleep. But there had he stood gripping her bag, the one she had behind the washer he never touched and then the bag was connecting with her face and she was in fight mode, no flight mode, no both. They're the same when you're cornered.

What she did hear was the thud of metal on his skull when the lamp connected with his head. What she heard was his slow exhale as he doubled over and clutched his newly slick head, his gasp when she wrenched her arm free from his grasp, his scream when she shut the door on the hand straining to retain its grip on her bag, and finally the sound of an engine starting - the sound of promise and possibility.

The mist rises, like the tide climbing until it engulfs the shore. It becomes a deep fog that blankets the road. Up ahead it seems to glow. She finds that ominous, but the glow of the yellow lane markings piercing through the fog reminds her of her mother's porch light, too. It reminds her of someone waiting to make sure she got home safe. She focuses on that image, turning it over in her mind, trying to grasp it and make it reality.

She begins breathing intentionally, noting each movement of her breath.

*She's okay. Everything will be fine, she thinks. The worst is behind her.*

She can't remember the last time her breaths weren't choked and ragged, forcing their way through bruised pipes. She remembers his breaths though, heavy and steaming as they were.

They pushed down on her, smothering her under their unwanted weight.

She inhales. Air passes in through her nose, down and down into her stomach, and pushes out against her belly. She lets it rest there a moment and rubs her belly, feeling its curve, anticipating its growth in the coming months. She exhales slowly, letting her belly contract as the breath traces its way up from her stomach to her chest and back out her nose.

Her muscles begin to unclench themselves and soon she's floating, blessedly alone and hidden in the fog. It's her own Cloak of Invisibility. The night couldn't be more perfect.

Maybe it knew how much she needed the cover. Maybe it heard her pleas. He was always calling her a witch. Maybe that is why she was finally able to leave. Why tonight she was able to leave him behind after nearly 4 years. The Witching Hour favors witches after all, not men.

So, she's stolen away from him. She's escaped four years of flinching at the sound of his key scratching at the lock. Four years, during which every friend she had slowly stopped visiting until all she was left with was his sister's barbed shoulder and single tear excuses. Four years of unexpected check-ups at work to make sure that her shirt covered up the marks he had left after she said "no" the night before.

It must be because of the magic of the Witching Hour. It must be because nothing less than magic could make her recognize the yellow markings ahead as the only path forward. Only magic could reveal the path to safety after she ignored the signs all this time.

She rests a hand on her stomach while the other steadies the wheel of a car, keeping it on course, following the yellow lines. All the while she thanks the primordial magic curled up inside her, nestled between her hips, for clearing her head and she wonders if he'll still be able to use that hand after tonight. She hopes not.

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