

Belief

by Michael J. Allen

The high collared dress strangled the air from my throat. The rest of the dress was equally tight, but the collar gripped with malice. People floated in and out of view, each emerging from different points in the thick fog just to disappear one after another in the same direction.

Where we were going?

The chill from the tall brittle grass climbed my legs. My finger dug under the collar lip, struggled to free some air and lost.

What is going on?

With each step after the disappearing crowd, shapes coalesced once again in the mists. A few appeared, then many, too many. They did not look my way when I approached. They didn't confer with each other in low whispers. They stared.

Each head was bent forward at the same angle, as if by a martinet sculptor. Each set of eyes seem to view the same point of ground at the crowd's center. If I'd not seen them approach moments before, I'd have thought the sculptor had worked them of ice.

I stepped closer. The grasses caught on my stockings, clawing small tears before releasing me. I still could not see what they were looking at.

"Excuse me," came my whisper.

Every face shifted to me. Their eyes caught me. I gasped for air, but there wasn't any. Sad eyes laid their overwhelming grief upon my shoulders. Accusations stabbed me from yet other eyes, dark with certainty about my guilt in some unknown crime. If grief, anger and accusations were enough to rob me of breathe, they were nothing to the terror laying ambush in their gazes. It sent mental fingernails dragging down the chalkboard of my spine.

They were terrified of me.

They stepped back, leaving a tight path to their center.

I slid through them, as unwilling to be touched as they were to touch me, to the edge of the grave. A charred emaciated body lay in the cold earth.

Why was there no coffin?

Its eyes sprang open and it screamed.

The spine wrenching scream demanded for instances and ages.

Why scream when I approached?

It did not beg for help.

What could I do to make it stop?

It did not cry for relief or restored life.

Why won't he accept his rest?

It demanded my blood in recompense for my crime.

What did I do?

The corpse's voice was a rusted ruin. "I always knew. I knew what you were. I knew you'd be all our deaths."

He rose from the grave and seized my arms. I pulled and tore, but the grip would not release me. I kicked and flailed, but the hands were metal. My breath raced from my lungs only to be shoved aside by my screams.

I wrenched against his grip.

He would not release me.

I bent to bite his arms, the last refuge of a terrified girl. The smell of charred flesh filled my nostrils. Bile rose to my tongue at the thought of biting the rotting dead flesh.

Why didn't he burn up in whatever fire killed him?

For the barest instant his skin was whole and alive. It was right enough that now I recognized the curmudgeonly old merchant and I abandoned my plan to bite him. His grip loosened ever so slightly and my screams abated.

I could breathe again.

He would be okay.

I would be okay.

It would all be okay.

He burst into flame.

Our screams escaped at the same time.

His flesh bubbled and melted, sliding over my own skin like warm molasses. The edges crisped and blackened. The surface cracked and crackled. Once again my breath was stolen, but this time by the heat rolling from his body. Flames danced now on the frilled edge of the god-accursed dress. The sleeves flashed alight. Smoke burned my lungs. The taste of crisping flesh was like acid on my tongue.

I bolted upright.

My bed shook from the sudden jump. The sound of my thundering heart filled my ears. My lungs sucked in the air around me with unrestrained avarice. The sound of a steady rain echoed off the roof above me.

I was okay.

I was safe in bed, dressed in my favorite flannel nightshirt with its luxuriously wide collar. The nightmare's images faded. My breath slowed and my heart quieted.

It would all be alright.

I took a long deep breath and glanced at my sister's bed. She mumbled something in her sleep. She must be dreaming too, but from the coos escaping her lips it was about her newest boy and not about murderous corpses.

I crept from our room to the kitchen, took down a glass and went to the indoor pump my father had installed next to a wash basin for my mother. Cool water rushed out, over the glass's rim and over my skin. A chill coursed my spine.

An all too familiar scream echoed out of the night.

My gaze jerked up from the glass now forgotten to my fingers. The glass tumbled into the basin. I heard it crack as if it had fallen in a different room.

Yellow and orange light danced across the kitchen window, reflected in my own wide eyed gaze. Across the square, the old man's mercantile was ablaze.

"Daddy! Mama! Fire!"

The house erupted with motions. My father raced to me, a question on his lips. The reflected flames caught his eye. He raced from the house without need to voice it. His voice cut through the night, the safe booming tenor I knew from countless bedtime stories or comfort from my nightmares raised the alarm and woke the village. In moments, the rough outline of a bucket line crossed between the well and the burning shop.

A hand grabbed my shoulder. I started and screamed.

"Come on, my girl. We've got to help."

"Yes, mama."

I followed her at a run into the rain. There were still only a few others on the bucket line. Someone shoved a full bucket into my hands. I tried to pass it on, but there was no one between me and the building.

My breath caught. I could almost feel the high collar wrapped around my throat.

I rushed forward with the bucket. It was heavier than it should have been, or so it seemed in my almost numb hands. Pins and needles prickled up and down my arms. I readied myself to throw the bucket's contents at the fire. Poised to throw, the dream rushed into my mind. An instant later, the burning, screaming merchant charged at me from within the building.

I froze.

"Throw it," someone yelled.

"Put him out," came another voice.

Sobbing over took me. I wanted to scream back that it would not work, that he would die anyway, but before I could he lurched forward and seized my arms.

Darkness collected in the corners of my vision. The pins and needles spread over my entire body. Lightheadedness overwhelmed me and I knew Death had me in its hands. A desperate all-encompassing need for this burning man to go away seized me.

"Throw it, my girl!"

I threw it.

The bucket knocked him backwards. The liquid within it crashed into him like a wave. Rather than quench the flames where the liquid fell, the contents exploded into an inferno. Another bucket was thrust into my tingling hands.

Both the merchant and I were shrieking.

I threw the second bucket forward, this time keeping hold of the bucket itself. The flames flared even higher. He staggered closer. His hands fell vise-like onto my arms.

I knew the smell of his burning flesh even before it clogged my nostrils.

I knew the taste of it before it burned my tongue like acid.

I knew the sight and feeling of his bubbling, melting flesh.

Someone yanked me out of his hands and dragged me away from the line. Others stepped forward, throwing buckets at him. The water from their buckets attacked the flames and eventually extinguished the now silent merchant.

I stumbled backward, still unable to take my eyes from him.

My mother helped me to my feet and turned me away. Eyes were on me from the surrounding villagers. I didn't want to look, but I could not escape the gazes I knew I would see.

I wasn't wrong.