
A Midwinter Night's Dream

A short story by Mike Roden

On my way out I took the recycling down to the bin. It's something I do without thinking, which was good because my mind was on Harriet's phone call.

'It's Leo,' she said. 'He's in a very strange mood.' A lot of you will remember my stories about her husband Leo, you may even have met him. He's fairly unforgettable, very thin, over six feet tall with a haunted air about him. A lovely chap, but prone to introspection.

'He's having these dreams,' Harriet had said, 'He thinks he's doomed.'

'We're all doomed in the end,' I muttered as I made my pathetic contribution against the coming climate cataclysm and dumped the bottles and paper in the bin.

I turned and almost collided with a stockily built stranger about my own age. He was carrying a bag of rubbish so I put on my friendly but firm voice. 'Sorry, this bin is for people in these flats.'

'I know,' he replied affably, 'I'm staying with my son. He's just moved in.'

Detecting a faint Scots accent I recalled my wife telling me that the new owner of number seven was from Scotland. I introduced myself.

His name was Brian. 'I've met your wife already,' he said. 'She's maybe told you we used to live in Battersea. Dad's work took him north when I was just a kid. We never came back.'

I didn't remember being told, but I nodded. 'So now your son's moved down here?'

'And I thought I'd come down, and see how the old place has changed.' He disposed of his rubbish. 'Your wife mentioned that the society was having a pre-Christmas drinks session next week. Said it'd be a chance to meet some Battersea folk.'

'Not a bad idea,' I said, 'Some of them were probably here when you were.'

'That's what she said. Someone called Leo?'

'Oh yes. He's been here – on and off – all his life. Actually, I'm just off to see him. Anyway, good to meet you,

Brian. See you next week in the pub if not before.'

As I came into their living room I felt like a prison chaplain visiting a condemned man. Leo sat staring at the fire with a tragic expression.

'So what's this dream you've been having? It can't be that bad, surely?'

'It gives me headaches thinking about it.' He eyed me mournfully. 'I've had it several times. Something's coming for me, I know it. Like a shadow approaching. I'm surrounded by people – maybe in a pub – but I'm alone with this feeling of terrible guilt. I know my time has come. Then something – someone – comes up to me and I know this is it and...'

'Yes?' I urged.

'And I wake up,' he said, 'Shaking and sweating...'

'And then wakes me up too!' said Harriet. There was the sound of post rattling through the letter box, and probably relieved to escape she went to get it.

'And I know it won't be long now,' Leo burst out. 'It's going to happen soon.'

'What's going to happen,' I demanded. 'What on earth have you done in your life to merit pursuing by the furies? You've lived the life of a saint, Leo, compared to some people.'

'Ah,' said Leo darkly, 'We've all done something. You will be found out in the end. Miss Duncan used to say that if you wouldn't own up to something.'

'Who's she?' I said, confused.

'My primary school teacher. She always knew....'

'And you probably felt guilty even if you hadn't done anything. It's anxiety that's all. You're worried about old age creeping up on you, perhaps.'

He shrugged, 'Bit late to worry about that.'

'What are you worrying about now?' said Harriet, putting a couple of letters on the table. She crossly waved the letter she was holding. 'That new postman's always putting things through the wrong door. I'll just take this next door.'

After she'd gone, I stared at my old friend. 'Leo, dreams are not forecasts of the future – they're a distillation of the past. Bits and pieces you've read and seen, all distorted. That's all.'

'So you say...' he grunted.

'Anyway, soon be Christmas. And we've got that drinks session at the Duke in a few days. You always enjoy that.'

'Who knows whether I'll still be here,' he returned glumly.

Well of course he was. He and Harriet arrived in the pub just after us. Only six days to Christmas but there was nothing festive about Leo. And there was something slightly panicky about the way he was staring round. There were quite a lot of people here already. 'People pressing round me.' He hissed. 'It's like the dream. Maybe it's going to happen here.'

I tried to make light of it. 'At least you're among friends,' I said but couldn't help a slight frisson of nervousness myself. If Nemesis really did descend on the Duke of Cambridge what form would it take?

Leo was suddenly distracted as Harriet handed him a letter. 'This is for you. That stupid postman stuck it through the door of number twenty five. I just found it in my bag...' He'd started ripping open the envelope. 'You don't need to open it now!'

He thrust the letter at her. 'I haven't got my glasses.'

'No, you never do,' she said, scanning the letter. Then she laughed. 'So your nightmare has come true. Your time has come, and you must go.'

'What?' he demanded.

'It's from the optician. Another reminder about you needing an eye test. Three years since your last.'

'I don't need an eye test. The glasses I've got...'

'Aren't good enough!' snapped Harriet. 'That's what's been giving you headaches. Eyestrain. Not these dreams.'

Leo looked toward me as if for support, but I shook my head. 'She's right. Like your dream predicted, your day of reckoning has arrived.'

Harriet was less than impressed. 'A lot of fuss about nothing. Sometimes Leo, I despair.'

'And next time you wake up dreaming you're going to be dragged to hell by harpies,' I said, 'Please just turn over and go back to sleep.'

As I spoke someone came up alongside me. It was Brian who I'd met the other morning. And his eyes

narrowed as he fixed Leo with a cold unfriendly stare.

'Could hardly fail to recognise you Leo could I? Bet you never thought you'd see me again.' There was a chill menace in the voice of this burly newcomer and those around us suddenly quietened

'Brian?' said Leo, confused. 'Is it really you?'

'Aye,' growled Brian, 'Your old classmate has returned.' He moved closer, 'It's time to settle our account, Leo. You thought you'd got away with it. But your sins will find you out, as Miss Duncan used to say.'

'What sins?' spluttered Leo. 'We were just little boys. And friends, I thought.'

Brian waited for a moment, 'Friends. Aye, so we were. And I lent

you a shilling for sweets - and you never gave it back.'

'A shilling?' stammered Leo, confused.

'You said you'd give it me back when you got your pocket money!'

'But you never came back. One day you were there, and then.' He paused suddenly realising, 'You went to Scotland?' Brian nodded, then Leo asked hesitantly, 'You've haven't really been holding a grudge about this all these years, have you?'

There was a long silence, then Brian let out a loud guffaw. 'Maybe I should have been an actor! I had you all believing I was some kind of Scots roughneck.' He grinned round at everyone, and the mood relaxed.

'Never gave that shilling a thought till I saw you standing there, Leo, and

it all came back to me.' Brian shook his head, 'Oh dear, you should have seen your face, Leo!'

Peace and goodwill returned to the Duke of Cambridge. If you were there you'll probably remember it. Leo took Brian round introducing him to everyone. Or maybe you don't recall it. It's funny the way the memory works.

I suppose you could say that Leo's premonition had come true. Nemesis had come calling for its pound of flesh, or at least five pence worth of it. These days Leo keeps his dreams to himself, and in case you were wondering, he did get himself a new pair of glasses.

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