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The Sound

by Fran Duffield

“Did you hear that? “

You look up from your screen. “Hear what?”

“I don’t know... rustling,” I say, frowning.

You slide further down in your seat. “Nope,” you say, abstracted in your scrolling.

I go and look in the darkened kitchen, thinking of a trapped local cat, or worst option, rat.

Flick the light on. Nothing.

“You getting a tea while you’re out there?” you call, “please...”

“Ok,” I fill the kettle and put it on to boil. I lean against the worktop. Close to my ear there is a sigh.

“Oh!” I can’t help exclaiming. I move away to the doorway. staring back at where I was standing.

“You ok?” you say, from the other side of the door. Not sure I am.

“Yeah, fine,” I say, not wanting to appear insane. The kettle has boiled, so I make the tea, all the hairs on my neck and arms on end like a static charge. As I lift the cups, there is a click of a latch, and I nearly drop them.

It’s coming from the bottom of the stairs, but there is no door or latch there. Soft slow steps on wood, as if carrying a heavy load up the narrow staircase.

“What are you doing out there?” you call again, puzzled.

“Coming, tea’s done,” I say, hoping I sound normal. I concentrate on not spilling the drinks, focusing on the cups, but out of the edge of my vision I get a glimpse of the living room. Flagstones, a blackened fireplace with sinking ashes, a wheelback chair, crooked shutters. Then you look up and the carpet is back, the curtains are thick, the sofa soft and covered in cushions.

“You ok?” you say, looking at me askance. I smile to reassure you. And myself.

“Fine,” I say. We sit and drink the tea, I stare at the TV, a comedy quiz laughs at its own jokes. It’s all OK now. Everything’s as it was. You finally put your phone down, and yawn. You stretch.

“Time for bed.” You yawn again. I stick close, I don’t want to be left behind downstairs on my own. Ridiculous.

The duvet is thick and comforting, I curl up close to you, and your breathing is soon the even sound of untroubled sleep. The rural night has only its usual noises, a yapping fox, wind in the trees. Then I hear it. Low humming, repetitive, a tune. I can’t make out what it is, but I know it’s sad. Then I feel a great calm. I realise she can’t see or hear me. She is still in her own life. The child is sick, and there is no medicine, only a lullaby. I put out my hand into the darkness as if I can console her. She stops humming, the child sleeps. I sleep.