

Lights in the Dark

He was in the deep end, now. He knew it. The truck's engine ticked down the degrees behind him, and the bugs smashed against the bumper pressed into the skin of his shoulders as he leaned back against it, looking out across the lake.

The wind was from the west and blew straight into his face, forcing small versions of tears he had no wish to shed. Her words when he'd stormed out of the house played like a loop in his head.

Fine. Run, you coward. Nobody charted this shit out for me either, but one more and one more isn't a map, and you know it.

He knew she had been right, and he should never have left in the first place. He'd risked the lives of everyone behind each opposing set of head-lights to get here. Sober him would have to carry that though, he knew, provided he ever made it back there. He was deep in alcohol logic territory, where sense was a byzantine accumulation of random synapse connections.

He drained the beer bottle in his hand, and then held it up in front of his eyes. The moon was full, and the wind fanning the acres of water below fractured the reflection of it into dancing shards. The frantic pin-points moved behind the green glass, and he was ushered back in time and memory with no warning. It arrived full-blown, in Technicolor.

It was a much younger him, though probably no less inebriated. But young drunk was a different beast. The heart was still strong, and the reflexes still fast. A young man can wear that dull blanket without an irregular pulse, and largely without any contemplation about where the road might end.

He'd demanded to leave the car they'd all been driving aimlessly around in for at least two reasons. A full bladder will not be denied forever, but the idea that she might actually be fucking the two other guys in it as well was enough to tip the scales. He could contemplate the idea it might be true only when he was in no real shape to contemplate anything. It was much safer that way. No need to puncture the story he and the girl had woven together so far. The version they probably both carried in an internal plastic sleeve, to be produced at will unruffled when circumstance started to say otherwise.

Like now.

Those three had indulged their obvious familiarity and all that implied, as he had downed beer after beer. The traffic stop had been sudden, but the charismatic one who'd been driving had passed his field-test, and had talked his way out of arrest and impound on the street in front of the cop car. As he'd watched Mr. Charisma perform for the officers through the side window, beer from the can he'd hastily hidden at the first chirp of the siren dribbled out from under the driver's seat to pool at his feet. If either cop had probed the back seat again with his flash-light before letting them go, *he'd* have been the one then called to account.

They'd driven to the edge of town after that, and Mr. Charisma had decided on an un-built subdivision plot to explore, a maze of asphalt paths that must have looked like some kind of symbol if viewed from above.

The moon had been full then too, as he drove them through the circles, courts, places, and trails still waiting to become themselves. They lacked only their proper names, and the structures that would define them and give them purpose. At the outer-most edge the driver had stopped, and yet-to-be-developed land stretched away towards low foothills, shrouded in high brush and groves of trees.

He had made his demand again, and had gotten out almost before the car had ceased moving. An apology had occurred to him, but it never made it to his lips. All he wanted was to leave this potential conspiracy behind, at least for a few minutes. He heard her make an excuse for him even as the car door closed on it.

The memory didn't contain the text of what she said. It only carried the embarrassment he had felt, and the anger that blossomed at the end of it.

There was a dirt track leading away from the sidewalk that ringed the yet un-named court Mr. Charisma had chosen as the terminus of their exploration. Music he hated pulsed from within the car as he made his way away from it. He had to pee in that way that can't be argued, but knew he still had a few minutes before it *had* to happen.

The track curved left and out of sight of his companions behind, and surrounding vegetation muted the sound-track leaking from the car as he made the turn. Ahead there were taller bushes and a few trees flanking it.

And there were lights.

Yellow-green pin-points were drifting by the hundreds across the path in lazy patterns.

He stopped.

He knew what they were, but in the moment it didn't matter. Everything was arrested, including his physical need.

He watched them, the tiniest of galaxies shifting in the space before him. In the moment they had seemed to be articulating patterns just out of his grasp, and his understanding only lacked a legend with which to interpret the map they were weaving for him. It seemed then the most perfect display of "almost" he'd ever seen.

Then his need had eclipsed the wonder, and he had to do what he couldn't put off any longer. The fire-flies dispersed for whatever reason they had to. Watching them depart, he felt a sense of loss in the knowledge any answer they may have carried for him had flown away. Now, he was only left with getting back in the car and seeing how it all played out.

But very much like the scattering swarm that night, they'd all gone their separate ways not long after, as young people mostly do. First it was the side-kick, then Mr. Charisma, and finally the girl. He never did get to know for sure, and maybe that was best. He had thought less and less of it as time had rushed madly on, and not at all for years. His only constant companion since had been the can, or bottle, even when the *real* girl had arrived not too many years later.

The memory stood aside as he lowered the green glass container.

Nobody charted this shit out for me either, but one more and one more isn't a map.

He deposited the bottle into the severely diminished case of beer on the ground next to him, and then struggled to his feet. After carrying the chip-board container on unsteady feet to the truck bed, he set it down inside, in the corner behind the driver's side.

The metal caps of the few remaining un-opened bottles inside glinted in the moon-light. He stared down at the sparks of light, and in his mind they started to swirl and multiply.

One more and one more isn't a map.

He turned away, and slid down the side of the truck until he was sitting on the gravel lot once more. He fumbled his phone out of his pocket and let muscle-memory get him where he wanted to go

with it. It rang as the wind stiffened, blowing at him sideways now and distorting the sound from the speaker against his ear.

She picked up on the second ring.

"Where are you?"

He told her, and started to articulate an explanation that she dismissed with a word.

"Stop. I'm on my way. Do *not* move, you hear me?"

Even as he murmured his assent and registered the dual bleep in his ear that informed him she'd severed the connection, a ghost of the memory returned.

The yellow-green lights were moving away, winking on and off.

What was. What is. Repeat.

It occurred to him that he could get up and have another beer or two before she got here.

Or not.