

**FETCH**

*“Jack and Jill*

*Went up the hill*

*To fetch a pail of water*

*Jack fell down*

*And broke his crown*

*and Jill came tumbling after”*

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The little girls were giggling. Their laughter like chimes above the guttural whisperings of the wind. The sky was a burning auburn as their bodies formed little silhouettes, still jumping and stumbling about, near the water well by the village square. He watched them with warm, moist eyes- partly because of the harshness of the sunset. *This is their favourite place*, he thought to himself. Oh, how they laughed at that old well! Echoes would incite their little flitting shrieks every time they leaned over the bricks to yodel into the stoney hollow. Oh, how precious was their innocence, freedom, and invigorating youth. And oh, little Jillian! John chuckled as his daughter ran up to him in her mud stained dress. She was just like her mother. He took her in his arms, the precious little thing, and carried her all the way home.

Dusk was waning by the time he secured the door shut. The quaint little house was the furthest from the village centre, and so the journey had taken some time. He moved quickly to bolt down the windows and the back doors. At their corner of the village, there would be almost no one nearby to call for help if John were to make any heedless decisions. The neighbours in the distance had already turned off their lights; he was swift to do the same. Luckily, little Jill had fallen asleep, so he didn't have to coax her into the quiet of the basement. As he laid her down, he wrapped her in thick pieces of wool, then closed the trapdoor.

'*Clink clonk,*' went the heavy locks. She was safe. For tonight.

He couldn't help but make the floor boards creak as he walked across the small living room. He knew the sounds would haunt her dreams tonight, but luckily, she never did manage to remember anything the next morning.

He took his place in his leather armchair and faced the door, waiting for the darkness to flood. The night was cold with anticipation waiting to engulf the village. Silence clothed each house like intangible snow- frigid, soft, and welcoming. With cold calloused hands, he reached over for the knitting needles atop the side table. There was some reassurance in feeling one stitch after another forming underneath his fingers- he learned that from his wife. He could slow his racing thoughts, at the least.

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He strode through the threshold of his home, and shut the door behind him. '*Thud.*' John felt the cold night wind strike his face like little daggers as he ran across the open field. Light was receding quickly. He entered the woods where a layer of fog covered the rugged, earthen floor in a purplish haze that reflected the luminescence of the downcast sky. The air was thick as John trekked among the skeletons of trees. At every twist of the head, he swore in his mind that he could almost see- even hear- the flitting and flapping of the satin cloak as it caught between outstretched branches. Perhaps it was simply the rustling of the wind that he was hearing. The wind was also picking up. *Strange.* The greater the density of the trees, the more violent the air seemed to attack him.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his left eye, he caught a glimpse of red. He turned fast towards it, but- as quickly as it had appeared- the image was gone. *He mustn't lose the cloak,* he thought, as he ran toward its direction. Finally, he saw it: A colour of deep scarlet that intruded his vision. As vivid as the moon- except it was more comparable to a blood moon. A

corner of the red satin was flapping in the wind. Obstructed from his view by some wide branches. Curling this way and that; it urged him onward.

*It must have gotten caught between those two trees ahead,* he thought with relief. When he arrived at the pair of trees however, there was no cloak caught in their branches. There was no red to be seen: it had vanished. Then he noticed it. A misty orb of faint light in the distance. Swaying in the distance. As if a little oil lamp was being swung from side to side. Side to side. *There is some one else in the forest. Who could it be?*

The light of day was quick to withdraw. John had been in the forest for quite some time. Darkness was now swelling and pervading the sky. The looming moon was already visible. Thick sinewy roots were scattered along the uneven terrain, and made his legs ache. His pace slowed. He grasped a thick trunk to steady himself from the trembling. *But it was cold and he was so tired,* he thought. *But someone is still lurking in the forest. But I still need to find Jillian.*

With a newfound resurgence of determination, John staggered upright and ran. He wore a look of terror on his bloodied face as he weaved in and out, and away from the clinging branches. He ran with such frantic force that he drove himself straight into a tree. The bark dug deep into his collarbone and along the scoop of his left shoulder. He saw dark and light splotches at the edge of his vision.

Suddenly, he felt a hand grasp his shoulder. He tried to shake off the hold but paused when he saw the wrinkly, but firm hand. It was just the old priest. His skin was pale and fragile against the lamplight that he held up.

*“John? John, old boy, what’s happened to you? What are you doing so late in the night?”*

The light from the lantern felt so warm against the darkness.

*“The faces, sir... All these faces...”* John glanced around anxiously to find them, but they had disappeared. A cold sweat was breaking out at the nape of his neck, and at the edges of his forehead.

*They were gone. It was as if they had never appeared,* he thought to himself. John was trembling- struck with bewilderment. The priest tried to speak some sense into him. It took him awhile before he recognized that one of the voices ringing in his head was actually audible.

*“Can you hear me Jack? Why are you alone in the forest at night?”*

*“Jillian. I’m looking for my daughter” John said with a weary expression.*

*“Your daughter?”*

*“Yes, Jillian...I can’t find her...please, sir.”*

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The morning came like every other. Except the innkeeper’s daughter had died. John awoke at the crack of dawn- as did the other elders of the town- and left the house to fetch some water from the village well. There was a small crowd gathered there. Few murmurs were passed among contorted faces and despairing eyes. A looming agony hung thick in the air, and grew heavier with each forward step. It had been quite some time before the last occurrence. As more villagers wandered into the square, a stillness sank upon them like a dreadful stone that repressed even the release of panic. He could see some of the girl through the crowd. A warm metallic stench disrupted his nostrils. Her blood was a stain underneath a tangle of white willowy limbs, obstructed from his view by living bodies that breathed out the same deathly silence.

He grimaced and shut his eyes tight. The old priest reached out a wrinkly hand to give him a pat on the shoulder. He nodded in sympathy. Everyone who was anyone at the village knew that the bodies never came back whole.

He wept as he carried the water home. He wept when he arrived. He sat in his chair for a while until his eyes dried. When his bloodshot tinge finally wore off, he made his way towards the trapdoor to wake his daughter. *‘Clink. Clonk.’* The door opened with a loud creak. He peered inside.

*She’s gone. The basement is empty.*

Then he heard the soft clicking sounds of a doorknob...it was somewhere in the house. He made his way towards it, taking long and hurried strides down the hall. There, he found Jillian as she earnestly turned and twisted at the knob of the locked bedroom door. She was crying.

*"No no. Not there baby. We can't stay there. Not tonight."*

Her big blue eyes brimmed with tears. *"I want mommy,"* she whispered.

*"I want her too. But we've got to go back down into the basement,"* John held out his hand. *"You'll come back down with me, won't you?"*

*"No,"* she said firmly. *"No. I-I lost my cloak. Mommy's cloak that she gave to me,"* she choked on her spittle. *"She'll get really mad if I don't have my red cloak."*

John tried to calm the crying girl. He stroked her long, slippery hair. Kissed her small, bright forehead. Then he held her in his arms as she whimpered into his chest. After some time, she pulled back to glance up at him. Gave a snuffle. Then a sweet smile slowly spread across her tear-streaked face. He would have to find her cloak before nightfall.

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*But I still need to find Jillian.*

He trekked, still, deeper into the dark woods. All of a sudden, the colour of red flooded his view as a gush of wind slapped him in the face. He squinted through watery eyes to see the dainty figure that had just fled from before him. She was wearing the cloak that his wife made. The red cloak that- he knew- he had been seeing all along throughout the forest.

*Oh no. Little Jillian.*

Desperate, John ran after her. She was running so fast; she must be so terrified. *She should never have left the safe room!*

*"Jillian. JILLIAN STOP. PLEASE,"* he called after her.

But she didn't stop. She sprinted. Ever so fast. A whirlwind of cold was a continuous stream against his face. The raw contact of bark scraped against his skin at every twist to avoid each trunk and bush that was in his way.

*"JILLIAN!" he yelled.*

Ahead of him, her red cloak extended outwards, curling with ripples from the wind. She rounded a large, fat tree and he followed. Grasping at the trunk for momentum at the abrupt turn, the slippery leaves caused him to slide sideways. He scraped his thigh before his head slammed into a stone, and then onto a thick jutting root. He quickly fell into unconsciousness.

John was passed out for nearly ten minutes. When his eyes fluttered open, red oozing blood was running along the crease of his eyelids from the gash on his crown. His limbs were entangled among the protruding web of roots along the forest floor. He wiped his eyes clear, then clawed at the tree to prop himself upright. There was a buzzing pain in his head. He blinked through bloodied eyes to see the white marble moon through the canopy of naked branches. The night had arrived.

He pushed off the tree and tried a couple of flimsy steps. He staggered out into the woods as branches spread like open arms to catch him.

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*"Your daughter?"*

*"Yes, Jillian...she's still out here...please, sir. Where's Jillian?"* John asked, frantic.

*"Jillian! Jillian please!"* he called out in panic.

*"Jack...you've never had a daughter named Jillian. Jillian was your wife. She died a long time ago ...Don't you remember?"*

*"..what are you talking about."*

*"Jillian. Your wife."*

The mud from the forest was still fresh on his boots, and stained his carpet floor. He placed his clenched fist against the cold door of the bedroom. *Her bedroom.* The words of the priest still resonating in his head.

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*'Clink. Clonk,'* went the locks. The basement door creaked open. The sound that reverberated could have easily been the whistling of the wind ...or even the groaning of a churning stomach, about to drive a sour wave of bile and foam streaming up the esophagus. He gingerly stepped down the first step. Second step. Third. Each with a heavy footed hesitance. When he climbed far enough down the flight of stairs for the room to come to view, heat flooded into his face. Blood reached the furthest recessions of his fingertips. He saw all of them covered in red. Their faces were so familiar. Willowy limbs with long tresses of hair. They were scattered all over the room. Bodies. Pieces of bodies. He reached for his thick, metal needles. And began his work. *'Tick. Tick. Tick.'*

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The next morning, John the lumberjack went to the well to get some water- as he usually did. He saw the old priest clearing a path among the villagers as he received their respects and sympathies for the morning. When they encountered each other, the priest greeted John with an empathetic nod. As did old woman baker, and the old innkeeper. It was a peaceful morning; the occurrences had ceased for some time.

He occupied himself with his labour for the rest of that day. He set off in that all-too-familiar forest. He found a sturdy tree, and began hacking. And hacking. And hacking.

Until he heard the flitting of little feet ...of a little girl's laughter chiming in the forest.

And a wide grin slowly spread across his face.

word count: 2250