

THE HEART NEVER SLEEPS

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These were the circumstances in which Mister had been sent to bed: after not finishing his bowl of chicken-noodle soup, he had been asked by his parents to throw it out the window into the garden patch. The boy had just been reading a book called "The History of Poverty," and told his parents very squarely that "millions of people from India to the Congo would kill for even a fraction of the meal that a modern North American boy enjoys." They were unimpressed; they told Mister that he could not have his dessert until he had either finished his meal or disposed of it in a sanitary way. Then, after Mister had spent an hour wrestling with his conscience over the cold slop, his father, who emerged from his parents' darkened bedroom in a blue bathrobe that was too short for him, reasoned with him that the flowers and grass outside the window would very likely benefit in their own way from the precious mush. Mister, who was protecting the soup with his arms (which were gangly and hardly afforded any protection at all), thought this made a half sort-of sense, and since he was very eager for a piece of his mother's mousse, languishing in a plastic case by the dish rack. He compromised on the subject—when his father had gone on a break to the bathroom—by feeding the victuals to the dog.

The dog's name was Butler. His parents had let Mister name the dog after the family's old servant. Mister had been devastated when Butler (the servant) had disappeared one night when their parents still owned the big house down town. Marguerite—his mother—had done her best to explain to him that she and his father could no longer afford to employ a servant after that (or, indeed, to own a big house down town) but Mister knew better. He had read in "The Social Problems of the Seventies" that the lower classes were frequently assaulted on their way to work in the squalid alleys near where they lived. Although he had pretended to believe his mother's story in order not to frighten her with the truth, he knew that somewhere Butler

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was lying walletless, his corpse bloated by rainwater, with strips of flesh torn off his sides by hungry, malfed dogs. In humid environments, read his "Moderne Cook," meat and especially flesh will putrefy more quickly than if kept in a dry, refrigerated environment such as a cool larder, or salted. To repair minor decay, reheat the meat until it begins to crisp.

Mister felt sorry for his old servant Butler because there would be no one around to attend to his remains. His parents believed in cremation and Michael thought it would be a very alimentary thing to do to every dead person. Plus, the idea of stray animals getting sick off spoiled meat worried him.

The moment Butler had finished lapping the rest of the chicken from Mister's soup bowl and off the white linoleum floor where some had been spilled, Mister moved to pilfer the mousse container. He planted his hands on the clear plastic and pushed to lift it from the platter, but just then his father emerged, head bowed, from the little bathroom door, and after satisfying himself that Mister had emptied the bowl somehow, sent him immediately to bed without any mousse.

These were the circumstances in which Mister waited: his yellow blanket pulled up to his chin, a stack of flat pillows bent around his head like jaws, a rocky terrain of "Lasso Larry and the Cherokees" comic books and world war two figures on the floor around him. Flying through the methane clouds on Venus, hopping from rock to rock on the rings of Saturn, a guest in the court of the King of Mars . . . he watched his mobile of the solar system make ablutions above his bed as Perseus did the gorgon—by its shadow. He waited this way until he was sure everyone in the house had fallen asleep, then he peeled himself out of his covers, tiptoed out the door, and gained the dusky kitchen where the mousse was. It was like a hard slab of mud that had been raised above the plastic countertop on display. Moonlight from the

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cracked transom window fell on it and made it the center of the room. Beneath the mousse was the ergonomic dishwasher, the user-friendly microwave, and the smart toaster which was self-cleaning and made of stainless steel. All these were dull beside the exotic display of the mousse about which they crowded.

At first Mister was worried Butler might bark and wake up the parents, but he wasn't to be seen. Mister thought his dad might have put him outside to poop and forgotten to bring him back in, in which case the dog might freeze to death. His dad was fairly irresponsible.

Mister found the container cover easy to remove, but the mousse was thick and had to be pried out with a spoon. The meat of it came out in dollops that Mister put in a pan on the stove. He turned on the burner and sat down to wait with one side of his back against the ice-dispensing refrigerator and the other against a row of plexiglass cabinets which gave in slightly on their hinges. He felt his chest moving up and down more and more slowly. Soon, his every breath felt strong and moved him like a lever. Besides his breathing, his eyes suddenly became very comfortable. He hadn't realized how comfortable they had become until he heard a tapping sound and opened his eyes (for that matter, he hadn't realized they were closed). The brightness of the linoleum floor suddenly lashed up at him as if it were vibrating in tight, aggressive circles; what was that tapping?

Afraid it was his dad, he rose quickly to his feet and waited. He waited a long time. Gradually his alertness faded so he had almost dozed off again, when the tapping began once more. It was coming from the transom window. Perhaps Butler was nosing at the glass, trying to get back in, thought Mister. He crept closer but could only see a vague swatch of grass along the bottom; no nose.

He thought the tapping would stop again but it didn't. It accelerated into a regular

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thump and then into a vicious banging noise, like: CRACK . . . CRACK . . . CRACK. Mister thought it would be good if his parents would wake up now, but he heard nothing from their room, like they were punishing him for sneaking out under their noses. He yelled for them but was too afraid to run to them because the horrible window was between him and their door. Now Mister could see a boot hitting the window, pushing it in and out with short, stabbing kicks. The glass, it CRACKED and became flexible, then exploded inward onto the floor. Mister pressed himself against the ice-dispensing refrigerator and admittedly began to cry.

Presently, a cuff-linked arm snaked its way into the room, swung open the transom window from the inside, and a sparsely haired old man in a suit jacket climbed through. Mister could see that it was Butler, his old servant, but his eyes weren't the same. They bulged like they were being pushed out from behind and pools of lazy skin sank away from them on all sides. Butler seemed surprised to see him, too, even though he never stopped climbing in. He pulled a thick brown sack in the window after him and instantly began to burgle everything in sight.

"Mister!" Butler said, while stealing some ties Mister's father had left on the sofa, "what are you doing here?"

Mister did not have the presence of mind to respond with anything more germane than, "I thought you were mugged in an alley and eaten by wild dogs and not burned!"

Butler found this funny, and expressed it with a slimy chuckle. "Your imagination always did get the best of you, mister." While he spoke he moved quickly through the kitchen—first to the refrigerator where he pilfered some left-over boiled chicken and some milk, then from countertop to countertop, yanking things from the wall and tossing them into

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his voluminous sack. "Oh sure I was mugged, that's true. One night a gang of cutpurses fell on me outside my home. Since I had no purse to cut, they instead said they would cut my throat.

"I noticed that one of them had a very serious case of fleas and also emanated a powerful, pungent odor. I remarked that he might be very successful solving both problems through the procurement of some eucalyptus oil from a naturopath with whom I had conveniently established a lasting feud. Surprised and impressed by my genial attitude and common sense, the gang identified themselves by name and invited me cordially to accompany them in a robbery of the naturopath's establishment, a crime to which I was readily disposed." Here Butler disappeared into Mister's room, muttering incoherently until he reemerged with his sack significantly heavier.

"Since that day me and my companions have become the most wanted burglars in Chicago, stealing anything conventionally useful from the rich." At this point he examined and eventually rejected the user-friendly microwave. "Because, as you will learn, the rich are useless, conventionally."

"But my parents aren't rich," said Mister.

"Nonsense," Butler said, and intently shook a box of garden seeds next to his ear.

Mister frowned at him for a while before he would speak again. "If the rich are useless then why do they buy useful things?"

"By accident." Butler was stuffing the doormat into the bulging sack. "When you have that much money, it's impossible not to every so often."

"Do you give it to the poor?"

"Of course not," Butler snorted.

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"You keep it?"

"We *recycle* it." He was now trying to shove the sack back out the window but it was so big parts of it kept sliding back in. Finally he succeeded and followed it out the hole. There was a brief clatter outside and his head reappeared above the sill. "Do you suppose you could give me a hand, mister?" he asked. "This isn't exactly a desk job."

"What happened to your friends?" Mister wanted to know. Butler's face became very serious and he shook his head. "Outsourcing," he said, and his face disappeared back into the garden.

This made a half sort-of sense to Mister, since it was a word he had heard his parents use, so he clambered up over the crags of broken glass and out into the garden. The little perimeter of grass and boring flowers that lined the house gave way almost immediately to broken sidewalk and pavement. The sidewalk joined a street up ahead, but Butler was trying to pull the sack down the alley in the other direction. Different colored night lights attached to the backside of shops gave the wet pavement goosebumps of green and violet. "Wait a minute!" Mister cried, and scrambled back into the house to turn off the stove. He was a responsible child, he thought.

In his hurry he cut his shin on a piece of glass coming back out the window. The gash stung for a moment and his whole ankle began to itch. He didn't have time to worry about it, though, because Butler was getting nervous: sirens had started up not far away.

Mister and Butler struggled down the alley with the sack in tow. The sidewalk was bumpy so like little hiccups the loot inside would occasionally pop up and clatter down as they dragged it along, not inconspicuously. Soon their view of the house was obscured by the trees

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of a park and then some low apartments. Butler was not as limber a baggage carrier as he was once so he had to stop and rest, once on a bench in the park and another time against someone's corrugated fence, even though the sirens had come closer and eventually stopped nearby. The police would reach Mister's house any minute, so he urged Butler along as best he could, and took hold of the sack.

"Where are we going?" gasped the boy. Every time he took a step his breath was pressed from him, shoulders to fingers, by the effort of hauling the sack. Butler was pointing at a train on some tracks up ahead but Mister was concentrating so hard it took a while for him to notice.

"That goes to the city's recycling plant at eleven o'clock. That's in five minutes. We get on that and we'll be fine. No problem," he said.

He meant it figuratively, of course, because helicopters had arrived over Mister's house in the distance and men in black were sliding down ropes to the roof. Each helicopter had three spotlights that it was using to search the surrounding neighborhood, but they hadn't found them yet. They reached the back of the train car and Butler stopped to say goodbye.

"Thanks my boy. It's too bad you're rich," he said. "You're a good boy, you know, deep down. Responsible."

Mister fidgeted. "I told you I'm not rich."

"Nonsense!" said the butler, "look at all this." He was jabbing the sack, which he had managed to lift over the lip of the car, with his elbow. Mister shook his head.

"My parents lost their jobs. This is almost all they own."

Butler frowned. Mister couldn't recall if he had seen Butler blink before now, but he had a very strange way of blinking where he would grimace at the same time. The grimace seemed

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to push whatever was pushing his eyeballs out from behind back in. When they weren't bulging they looked like the good old eyes he remembered. Gentle, mostly.

"Then I shall return it," he said sadly.

"But you'll be caught!" Mister thought it must almost be time for the train to leave. He tried to stop Butler as he pulled the sack out of the boxcar. It cascaded to the ground with a thunderous crash. As if he was not even tired, Butler dragged it back up the street alone, his new eyes pointing out in front like headlights. He had to lean so far over to get it to move that his body was bent in half.

Mister hurried after him. "You'll escape in the train! I'll tell the police where the things are, you can get away."

The old man shook his head. "I'm a responsible man." Mister clutched at his sleeve in silence. Finally the stoic butler stopped walking. Up ahead there was a flicker of red and blue on the wall of Mister's house. "Remember to recycle," he said, and set off alone up the alley.

Several police moved out from the side of the house and crouched with their big guns out. One with a loudspeaker stood up behind them. "Stop and put your hands on your head," he said through the loudspeaker, but still Butler kept plodding along. The police took cover behind some trash cans in a driveway up the alley. There were at least twenty of them, now. "If you do not stop, you will be apprehended by force." Now there were helicopters circling overhead. Their searchlights poured down on Butler and made him the center of the world. "This is your last warning." Armored policemen with kevlar shields and long nightsticks prowled at the perimeter.

Then one of the houses across the street collapsed in an explosion that sent chunks of concrete flying into the alley, and out of the dust emerged the 15th field artillery battalion, and

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then from around the corner came a thunderous stream of Cherokees in ceremonial dress with spears and bows and arrows, whooping and screaming, and out of the sky plummeted the knights of the Martian court, with the livery of the four-eyed Orion on their lances and the saddles of their winged reptilian mounts. And among them was Perseus on his own winged horse Pegasus, his sickle in one hand and his shield in the other, and behind him was Medusa and Poseidon's monster. Far below, the policeman with the loudspeaker shouted, "Go! Go! Go!" and the armored officers charged out from their ranks. There must have been a hundred of them.

Butler had reached the broken window of the house and was climbing in when all the monsters and the soldiers and the policemen and the warriors and the knights converged on him. A huge dust cloud formed around them and hid everything but the sounds of battle, which sounded like paper being crumpled only quite a bit louder. The dust cloud expanded and expanded until finally it engulfed the house, and the bumpy sidewalk, and the alley with the spots of light, and finally it engulfed Mister.

His own coughing woke him. They were deep coughs that pushed everything inside out. His eyes stung when he opened them, but not because the floor was too bright. In fact, he couldn't see the floor. It was like someone was pressing a hot cloth right up against his eyeballs. His back ached where it was still pressed up against the refrigerator and the cabinet in the kitchen. He could hear sirens. The police! No, wait. A burly figure approached him through the haze in a gas mask. Was he in a war?

No, it was a fireman! The fireman scooped him up in his arms and that's when his sense of smell returned. It was a familiar smell, but it turned his stomach: mousse! Burning mousse!

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The fireman carried him on his shoulder until the smoke fell away and he could make out the garden with the stupid little flowers, and once past these he was set down on his own feet on the sidewalk. A fire engine was parked a few feet away and more firemen poured out of its carriage with hoses and shovels. He turned around and he saw it all: his house was burning; it was already a pillar of flames lapping at the stars where he could make out the planet Mars, rippling above the heat from the conflagration.

The fireman that had carried him outside surprised him by speaking. "Was there anyone else inside? Were your parents inside?" Then part of the house collapsed with an explosion that sent splinters of wood out into the alley. The fireman shook his head, and when Mister would say nothing, he left him there to join the other firemen.

"I must go back," Mister said. "I am a responsible child." Little tears made their way down his cheeks as if to suggest to him that he might cry the fire out. He thought he could. He returned to the front door, but it had fallen in and was hidden in an abundance of flame, so he skirted to the side and saw he could still enter through the broken window. He began to climb in and heard shouts behind him for him to stop. He could hear heavy boots getting closer, but he was too fast for them.

He slipped inside and jumped down from the sill, but he landed wrong among the smoldering furniture and he felt an intense pain in his shin that forced him to the ground, and he cried out. The cut there had become swollen and infected, but that was not what caused him to yell. Just in front of him was the half-charred carcass of his dog, Butler, with some parts, like the bulging eyes, still bubbling and popping from the heat.

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