

REBECCA BORLAND REYNOLDS

SHORT STORY



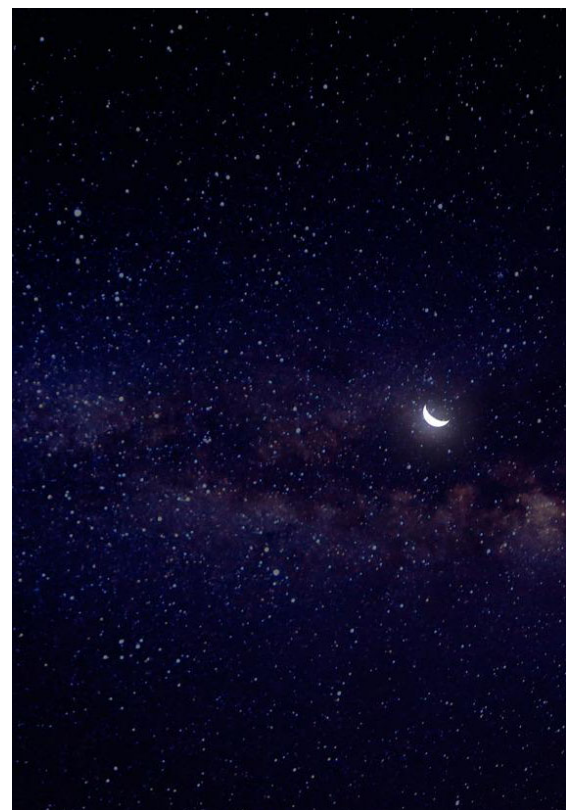
The Strange Night of Buckie Frazier

BY REBECCA BORLAND REYNOLDS

He was a stout fellow. Hair sticking out every which way, an ample nose, coarse reddish skin, and hands as rough as old wood. He walked with a weave, a bit like a drunk, and while he did indeed enjoy his pint, the hitch in his gait came from a just fore-shortened leg.

Buckie Frasier was on his way home from the village. It was a near moonless night, and he walked more by feel than by sight. He'd lived in this place his whole life long, and he could walk it blind-folded had it occurred to him to do so. His meager mind was traipsing across the furrows of random thoughts etched in his brain - the coming of calves, the blossoming of the gorse, the scratch of his starched shirt last Sunday morning. Nothing of consequence. Just the ticking the bed of his life was made of, in which he firmly, if unconsciously, lay.

His breath came with a bit of a wheeze, as if he expended some effort. In fact, he was quite fit under his stretched and sagging woolens, the wheeze a product of his love of the pipe. His forefinger was stained the color of ocher from tamping tobacco down the snout, as he took his long purposeful drags. Smoking pipe was his own meditation: the resulting swirls wending their way toward the heavens, his simple prayer. As he pulled the sweet smoke into his body, his mind did go to slate, wiped clean, if only for a moment. Buckie was a solitary man, minding his business, with little that bothered or excited him





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The speed with which it raced by then, startled him. He'd nearly stepped on it, but just as his sole brushed it, off it ran, down the other end of the lane. He only heard it after it had passed. A kind of yelp or yip; he was surprised he couldn't tell the difference. It was that that caught his attention. Had it been a hare or a fox or a neighbor's cat? And had he startled it or merely stepped just right across its path?

Silence fell and with it, his interest, so he took a step to move on, when he heard it again. The yip-yelp. What was it? It was something Buckie couldn't put name to in this place he called home, in this place where nothing ever surprised him, so much so he didn't even realize it. The sheer oddness of not knowing caused Buckie to step off his path and make his way down the other lane toward the sound he couldn't identify.

He followed a faint and intermittent rustling, barely audible, but for him, a clear beacon through the loamy dark. Buckie's ears were sensitized to life here. He knew its sounds like his own breath, so that something unrecognizable was like a foghorn across his mind. As he approached, he slowed and quieted his step. He instinctively let his foot down upon the earth such that it made no sound, no crunch or slip or pulse. How he did this is something only people of the land know: a capability useful to those who catch their food or tend to animals more sure-footed than a human.

He more felt than heard its breath, and he stilled his like he was turning down a burner on the stove. He breathed with it so it wouldn't notice him. He waited. His heart pumped softly in his chest, and he willed it too, quiet. No more yelp. No sound at all. Had it breathed its last breath? Or did it sense he was near and did as he, slowing all to go undetected?

In the hedge against the lane, Buckie caught a spark of light. The back of an eye reflecting itself into the night. Buckie watched. The cool night air softly buffeted his cheeks, and he felt the edge of his skin, the thin film that contained him, kept him from bleeding into all that is. He felt his pores and breathed through them, as if to open those mini portals to the world beyond, and to this creature, nestled hiding so close to him. He stood without movement. Without thought. Waiting.

How long it took was uncertain, but something made Buckie move in closer. He moved like a great elephant on the African savanna, his mass belying the grace of his step. One, two, then a third step closer to where the animal rested. He leaned in and saw them. Two glistening iridescent eyes looking right at him, as if waiting for him all this time. He started slightly, from the intensity of the gaze. But he kept his ground. They were big eyes, not of a hare or fox, nor of a house cat. As his own eyes adjusted, the eyes still looking at him appeared to hang there, disembodied and he realized the animal was black. And from the size of the eyes, it was as big as a large dog.



Cat Sith, the old legend of fairy or witch, said to roam the Highlands, shape-shifting and granting wishes.

Buckie experienced something he hadn't in a long while: the unknown. As he crouched there staring into the dark, he felt the sensations of wonder and curiosity pulse through him. The hair on his arms stood up, his heart picked up speed, and he felt the exquisite sensation of presence. Their locked gaze stunned him, awoke him in a way, and he had to know what this creature was.

He reached forward and heard the hiss. It wasn't the sound of an animal in pain but rather, it felt to Buckie like a warning. It was as if it had waited for him, but now, was making clear who was in charge. Without thinking, Buckie spoke to it. "Whoa there. I mean ye no harm." So, it was a cat, he thought, but it surely did seem much larger. He figured his eyes were playing tricks on him in this dark. And he leaned in closer to touch the thing, assuming it was injured.

As Buckie reached his hand to where he thought the back of the cat might be, a soft but powerful limb smacked his hand down on the ground and pinned it there. Instinctively, Buckie thought to pull it back, but the sensation of the creature stopped him. He felt the power of the animal and, in some way, its intention. It held Buckie there. And he sensed it had a purpose.

This cat was also enormous, judging from the limb. Buckie's mind raced, trying to fathom what it might be. There were not many big cats in this part of the world, and none that he knew of ever sighted. Was it some sort of cat hybrid or aberrant that he'd come across this night? The limb still pinning his hand, Buckie could feel the animal's life resounding in the ground. If it was a big cat, he surely was in danger and should get the hell out of there, he thought. But oddly, he didn't sense himself threatened.

And then a voice in him said "Cat Sith," the old legend of fairy or witch, said to roam the Highlands, shape-shifting and granting wishes. "Be damned," he muttered cynically, but the limb pressed harder as he did. And just as suddenly, it let him go. Buckie pulled back his arm, aching some from the position. He rearranged himself a bit, and the cat hissed again. Buckie felt some irritation nudge aside his curiosity and he said without thinking, "to hell with ye, then," and shifted as if to get up and go.

In a flash, the thing was up on all fours and thumped Buckie flat to the ground, one fry pan of a paw held him right over his heart, with those great eyes staring down into his own. Now Buckie was fully alert - as though he and this animal were one thing, and the few stars that pierced the sky above its massive black head made it a kind of halo. It was a mesmerizing sight. The hot breath puffed over Buckie's face as he lay in the crusted dirt of the lane, and he finally had a thought. What should he do?

"This thing could tear me limb from limb," his mind raced in the mix of panic and excitement that adrenaline stirs. And while he was terrified, he also was awed. His attention was called back to the eyes. They wanted something. The cat breathed evenly, paw to Buckie's chest, no doubt feeling the beating of his heart. As if it was waiting.

And Buckie realized then that it had been waiting. Waiting for him to come down the lane and find it. Waiting for him to come closer and reach out. The yelp/yip was unfamiliar to him because he hadn't heard it before. It had been a call...to him.



*Took the souls of
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As he lay there, Buckie let go. He knew he was in no position to fight. He didn't even want to. He lay there, breath shifting to match the cat's, heartbeat slowing to normal, his calm returning. And the cat released him. He lay there still, with the cat peering down at him. And he recalled something else about the Cat Sith - it was said that it took souls. Took the souls of the dead before they could be claimed by the gods. And so, people employed practices to distract the Cat Sith so it wouldn't take the soul from the laying dead. No fires would be lit since, as it went, the cat was attracted to the warmth. His grandmother had told him such stories when he was a lad. They scared him until he was old enough to dismiss them as the superstitions of the old generation.

But now, as his mind brought his grandmother's voice back to him, the great black beast towering above him seemed itself to be speaking. And with the paw off of him, Buckie noticed the blaze of white on the cat's chest. A lone mark of light in this expanse of black fur, invisible in the dark of night. The blaze and the eyes were all he could see, and he closed his eyes to them. There was something he was trying to remember, or to hear, from deep inside himself. A memory, perhaps, of his grandmother. Or something he had read long ago.

Interrupting his musing, the cat brushed its head against his cheek, the hard bone of its jaw striking him softly. Not with malice, but as if to get his notice. He opened his eyes and asked, "whit dae ye want with me then?"

And in his head, he heard "Get ye to Donnan's." "Donnan Gallach?" Buckie said this aloud, as if expecting the cat to answer. Donnan was an old friend of his father's - his father had passed near ten years ago, and he hadn't seen much of Donnan since. Donnan had been like an uncle to him, but after his da died, being around Donnan had brought out the grief in him. He was sorry for it. But there it was.

"Donnan Gallach?" he repeated, still looking into the cat's eyes. And the great cat was gone. Buckie felt it as it leapt away, the whoosh of the air as it took off. He sat up and looked about, expecting to see it running off. But even with its warm breath still in the air, there was no sight of it. It was simply gone. Buckie sat where he was. He rubbed his forehead and scratched his jaw. He shook his head hard and fast, then waited for his brain to re-settle. He reviewed the last hour. The brush under his foot, the call, following the rustle, being pinned, the gaze and halo, the giant paw. The feeling of oneness with the great cat, and the stupefying wonder of what it was and where it came from. And his grandmother's voice saying "Cat Sith"... and then hearing Donnan's name.

Buckie picked himself off the ground, brushing the gravel off his backside as he headed back down the lane. As he rounded the corner to his place, he thought better of it and kept going toward Donnan's. The dawn was just barely making itself known, and the frigid air made him shudder. A wee light shone from inside Donnan's cottage, the only one as far as he could see. He thought it odd. When he knocked on the door, Mrs. Bantry opened it. Her cheeks were white and eyes suddenly wide. "Aw, Buckie," she cried, "Donnan's gone, just now. How on earth did ye ken?"