



COLD WIND
Nicola Griffith

rovina cai

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by

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From the park on Puget Sound I watched the sun go down on the shortest day of the year. The air lost its lemon glitter, the dancing water dulled to a greasy heave, and the moon, not yet at its height, grew more substantial. Clouds gathered along the horizon, dirty yellow-white and gory at one end, like a broken arctic fox. Snow wasn't in the forecast, but I could smell it.

More than snow. If all the clues I'd put together over the years were right, it would happen tonight.

I let the weather herd me from the waterfront park into the city, south then east, through the restaurant district and downtown. The streets should have been thronged with last-minute holiday shoppers but the weather had driven them toward the safety of home.

By the time I reached the urban neighborhood of Capitol Hill, the moon was behind an iron lid of cloud, and sleet streaked the dark with pearl.

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Inside the women's bar, customers were dressed a little better than usual: wool rather than fleece, cashmere blend instead of merino, and all in richer, more celebratory colors. The air was spiced with cinnamon and anticipation. Women looked up when the door opened, they leaned towards one another, faces alight like children waiting for teacher to announce a story, a present, a visit from Santa.

The holidays, time out of time. Mørketiden or Mōdraniht, Solstice or Soyal, Yaldā or Yule or the Cold Moon Dance, it doesn't matter what people call the turn of the year; it fills them with the drumbeat of expectancy. Even in cities a mammalian body can't escape the deep rhythms imposed by the solar cycle and reinforced by myth. Night would end. Light would come.

Daylight. Daybreak. Crack of dawn. You can tell a lot about a culture from its metaphors: the world is fragile, breakable, spillable as an egg. People felt it. Beyond the warmth and light cast by the holiday they sensed predators roaming the dark. It made people long to be with their own kind. Even those who were not usually lonely hungered to belong.

I sat by the window, facing the door, and sipped Guinness black as licorice and topped with a head like beige meringue. I savored the thrust of rusty-fist body through the velvet glove of foam, glad of the low alcohol. Daybreak

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was a long way off.

Three women in front of me were complaining about babysitters; someone's youngest had chicken pox and another urged her to throw a holiday pox party so they could get all their children infected at once. After all, wasn't it better for the body to get its immunity naturally, the old-fashioned way?

It was one of the most pernicious fallacies, common the world over: old ways are best. But old ways can outlast their usefulness. Old ways can live on pointlessly in worlds that have no room for them.

I drained my beer and almost, from force of habit, recorded my interaction with the server when she took my order for a refill. But I wasn't here to work and, besides, it would have given me nothing useful, no information on the meeting of equals: the customer is always a little higher on the food chain, at least on the surface.

A woman in the far corner was smiling at me. A woman with the weathered look of a practiced alcoholic. I smiled back; it was the holidays. She brightened. If I brightened in turn she would wave me over. "Let's not be alone at Christmas," she'd say. And I could say...anything. It wouldn't matter because drunks forget it all before they reach the bottom of the glass. I could say: I'm so very, very tired of being alone. I ache, I yearn, I hunger for more.

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But women like her would never be my more. So I shook my head and raised my glass with the inclination of the head that, the world over, meant: *Thank you. We are done.*

I sipped my Guinness again, looked at the sky—the sleet was getting whiter—and checked the time. Not yet. So I tuned them all out and listened to the music, a heartfelt rendition of an old blues piece by a woman with a clearly detectable English accent beneath the Delta tones. Perhaps there was a paper in it: In this decade, why do English women sing the blues better than anyone since those who invented it? Music traditions flitted from one place to another acquiring heft and solidity as different cultures adopted them. Over the years they became majestic and apparently eternal. They never were.

The music, at least, did not make me feel like an outsider. It was an old friend. I let it talk to me, let it in, let the fat, untuned bass drum, timed to a slow heartbeat, drive the melody into the marrow of my long bones where it hummed like a bee, and the river of music push against the wall of my belly...

...and they were speaking Korean at a table against the wall, which took me back to the biting cold of the Korean DMZ, the mud on the drinking hole sprinkled with frost, the water buffalo and her calf—

The door slammed open bringing with it a gust of

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snowy air—and a scent older than anything in the city.
Every cell in my body leapt.

Two women came in laughing. The one in jeans and a down vest seemed taller, though she wasn't. Her cheeks were hectic, brown eyes brilliant, and not only from the cold. Women have lit up that way for thousands of years when they have found someone they want, someone whose belly will lie on theirs heavy and soft and urgent, whose weight they welcome, whose voice thrills them, whose taste, scent, turn of the head makes them thrum with need, ring and sing with it. They laugh. They glow.

The other was paler, the red-brown of old ivory stained with tea. Her eyes were brown, too, slanted and wide set. Deep brown, velvet. Snow dappled her hair. She stood by the door, blinking, as people do when they walk from dark into light.

My aorta opened wide and blood gushed through every artery, all my senses gearing up. But I pretended not to see her. I gazed out of the window, at the sleet turning to snow, the air clotting with cold, and the pavement softening from black to gray. Reflected in the glass the women around me were coming alert, spines straightening, cheeks blooming, capillaries opening.

She was here. She was real. I'd been right.

The woman in the down vest smiled, touched the other

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on the shoulder, and said something. They moved through the doorway to the pool room and out of sight.

I'd been right. I relished the realization because soon I wouldn't be able to; soon my mind would be submerged and I'd be lost in a pull almost as old as the turning of the seasons. I watched the snow come down in streetlight cold as moonlight and, for a moment, missed the old sodium lamps with their warm yellow glow, their hint of hearth and home and belonging.

I pondered her clothes: long dress, with a thick drape; long coat of oddly indeterminate color; boots. Those were long, too. Not shiny. Brown? Black? I frowned. I couldn't tell. It didn't matter. She was here. It would go as it would.

I moved into energy-conservation mode, as in the field when watching groups whose habits you know as well as your own name: reflexes begun but arrested, peripheral vision engaged. Around me the bar moved from hot to simmering and now a new scent undercut the usual wood-and-hops of microbrews and the holiday cinnamon: the sting of liquor. Someone turned up the music. Two women at different tables—one of the Koreans and a gap-toothed white girl—exchanged glances; one followed the other to the bathroom.

The snow fell steadily. Traffic would be snarling the intersections, blocked by buses slid sideways down the hill.

Soon those vehicles would be abandoned and the streets utterly empty. The CCTV would be locked with cold.

Soon.

The foam on the inside of my glass sagged like a curtain swag then slid to the bottom. I'd drunk it faster than I'd meant. At the table by the wall a Korean voice was raised—her girlfriend had taken too long in the bathroom, “Because there are two crazy women in there!”

The bathroom.

But as I stood the world swam and lost focus for a moment, then reformed around the doorway from the pool room. She stepped through. Her long coat was fastened to the collar. Toggled with horn, not buttoned. It looked beige and cream against the doorjamb but gray-blue in its shadowed folds. Perfect camouflage.

She saw me. Her face didn't move, but I knew how it would be when she flung her head back, cried out, clutched my shoulders as she shuddered. I felt her breath against my collarbone as she folded there, the brush of her mouth against my skin.

She came toward me, stepping around the spilt beer and dropped fries, lifting her feet high, placing them carefully, as though she wore tall heels.

I watched, unable—unwilling—to move.

And then she stood before me. I could smell her—

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woodland, fern, musk—and I wanted to reach, fold her down, stretch her out on the bracken, and feel the pulse flutter at her neck.

“You were watching me,” she said, and her voice sounded hoarse, as though used to a bigger throat.

“I’m . . . an anthropologist. It’s what we do.” I’ve been looking for you for a long time. I didn’t think you existed.

“What’s your name?”

I thought about that. “Onca.”

She nodded; it meant nothing to her. Her eyes were so dark. She turned up her collar. “I’ll see you, Onca. Soon, I hope.” A cold stream purred through her voice and snow blew across her eyes. Come outside, under the sky with me, they said.

I nodded. We both knew I would: she called, others followed. It’s who she was.

And then she was gone. I didn’t look out of the window. If the stories were true in this way too, I wouldn’t be able to see her, not yet.



I found her victim in the bathroom, the blind spot with no cameras. She wasn’t dead. She sat propped on the seat in a stall, jeans around her knees, head against the wall. She

grinned at me foolishly. “Can’t move,” she said.

I locked the stall behind me. “Does it hurt?”

“Naw.”

It would. I smelled blood, just a little. I bent, looked at her shirt darkening between her breasts. “Can you draw a deep breath?”

She tried. In reality it was more of a sigh. But she didn’t flinch or cough. No broken ribs.

I squatted in front of her, elbows on knees, hands dangling comfortably. She just kept smiling, head at that odd angle against the wall. In that position she couldn’t see me. I stood, straightened her head, then, because it was distracting, I leaned her on my shoulder, lifted, and pulled up her jeans. She could fasten them herself later, or not.

I squatted again, regarded her. She was still smiling, but it was a faint echo of what it had been. No longer solid. After this not much would be. “There’s a legend,” I said. “More than a dozen legends, from all over the world.” La Llorona. Or Flura. Xana, Iara, Naag Kanya . . . “She lures people with sex. Some say she takes your heart.” Sometimes literally. “But she always takes something.” I considered her. “She’s taken your spirit.”

“My...”

I waited, but she didn’t say any more. “Your soul.” As good a word as any. “You’re tired, I should think.”

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Her smile faded, like a guttering flame. She might survive. She would never feel alive again.

I wasn't sure she could hear me anymore. I leaned forward, unbuttoned her shirt. The bruise was swelling too quickly to be sure, but the shape cut into the broken skin—lovely skin, over firm muscle—could have been from a blow by a hoof.

“What’s your name?”

“Maria José Flores.”

“Maria, you make me hungry.” And she would have, with her spirit intact. “But not like this.” I fastened her back up and stood. Time to go.



The city was another world in the snow. Silent. Flakes falling soft as owl feathers. Time out of time.

The streets were empty. No traffic in or out. It would last until she was done. I'd traced her through campfire stories, elders' tales, academic papers, psychiatric reports; it's what she did. She had been new in the world when Columbus came; alone. Over the centuries she had refined her methods until they were ritual: she fed early on the evening of a winter high day or holiday, brought her strength to peak, then chose someone to play with all night.

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Someone strong. Someone who would last.

I had put myself in her path and she had chosen me, and now I must seek her out. But as I did, as I followed her, she was shadowing me, herding me. I didn't try to pinpoint her—she was at the height of her powers, luxuriant with Maria Flores—but I knew she was there somewhere, behind the abandoned, snow-shrouded cars, in the doorway, behind the dumpster and the frozen cameras. I felt her on my left, a presence as subtle as atmospheric pressure, turning me north. I knew where she wanted me to go. So I padded through the muffled white dream downtown had become, pacing my shadow along the old brick and concrete walls of back streets and alleys, toward the edge of the city, where land met sea.

Alleys widened to open space and the sky glimmered with reflected water light. The land began to climb and undulate. Under the snow, pavement softened to grass and then alternating gravel path and turf on dirt layered on concrete. A switchback over a road. The sculpture park overlooking the Sound.

Before I reached the brow of the hill I stopped and listened. Silence. So profound I heard the snow falling, settling with a crystalline hiss, bright and sharp as stars. I closed my eyes, opened my mouth a little, breathed and tongued the air to the roof of my mouth. There. To the

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west. Where there should be only the cold snow, industrial solvents beneath the thin layer of topsoil trucked in and grassed over, and the restless damp of the Sound. The sharp tang of woman, of beast.

I opened my eyes, let blood flood the muscles of my shoulders and thighs, and listened.

The snow stopped. A breath of wind ruffled my hair. The clouds thinned from iron to mother-of-pearl, lit from above by moonlight. To the west, the Sound shimmered.

Eyes unfocused, vision wide to catch motion, I saw the shadow picking its way over the snow. If I closed my eyes I would hear the lift and delicate step of a doe moving through undergrowth.

I moved again, keeping low, east then south. I stopped. Coughed, deliberately, and felt as much as heard her ears flick and nostrils flare as she tracked my position. Come, I thought, come to me.

And she did. She crossed the skyline and I saw her clearly.

Her coat was winter beige, thick and soft, pale as underfur at her throat and where it folded back as she walked. Her knees bent the wrong way. Her dark boots were not boots.

Deer Woman.

I took off my jacket and dropped it in the snow. I

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opened my shirt.

She stopped, nostrils opening and closing. Her head moved back, her right leg lifted as though to stamp. But there was no herd to signal. She kept coming.

She wanted me to run, so I did. I bounded away, moving through trees—they were not big enough to climb—north and east, leaping the concrete wall, running between the looming sculptures, until I was among the cluster of greenery at the corner of the park. She followed.

Two hundred years ago, even a hundred, when there were still wolves in the north of this country and big cats in the south, she would have been more careful, but she had been playing predator, not prey, for too long. No doubt she had lost count of nights like this, the victims whose fear for a while overwhelmed their attraction. She would take her time, not risk her legs on those walls. She was still sleek with Maria, and this was the height of her yearly rite, not to be rushed.

The sky was almost white now. Against it, bare twigs stood out like black lace. I couldn't see the water from here but I could smell it. It softened the air, utterly unlike the arid cold of Korea, coarse as salt. Korea, where it was rumored that the Amur leopard was back in the DMZ.

The snow crunched. Closer, so much closer than I expected; I'd been careless, too. She was not a buffalo calf.

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Moonlight spilled through the cloud and splashed onto the snow and I saw the darker line in the gray-blue shadow of the steel sculpture.

“Onca,” it said. “Come to me.”

Recklessness burst in me, brilliant as a star. I stood, and left the safety of the trees.

Moon shadow is steep and sharp. The tracks I made looked like craters. Her scent ripened, rich and round against the keen night air. I swallowed.

“I can’t see you.” My voice was ragged, my breath fast.

She stepped from the shadow.

I moved closer. Closer still, until I could see the pulsing ribbon of artery along her neck, the snowflake on a thread of her hair. Strong hair, brown-black.

“Kneel,” she said. She wanted me beneath her in the snow. She would fold down on me and crush the breath from my lungs until my heart stopped and she could lap me up and run, run through the trees, safe, strong for another year.

“No,” I said.

She went very still. I regarded her. After a moment I stepped to one side so she could see my tracks.

She took a step backward. It wouldn’t be enough. It would never have been enough, even in the long ago.

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“Onca.” My newest name, *Panthera onca*. “B’alam before that. And long, long ago, Viima.” She didn’t understand. I’d been a myth before she was born.

I waited.

She looked at the tracks again: a half moon and four circles. Unmistakable.

She shot away, all deer now, straight for the trees lining Western Avenue. They always go for the trees.

In the DMZ the water buffalo had been heavier, and horned, but only a buffalo, nothing like my equal. Deer Woman ran like a rumor, like the wind, but I was made for this, and though I hadn’t hunted one of my kind for an age, had thought I had taken the last a lifetime ago, she had never run from one like me. I was older. Much older. And at short range, cats are faster than deer.

I brought her down with one swipe to the legs and she tumbled into the snow. She panted, tail flickering. Her hind legs tightened as she prepared to scramble up and run again. I stood over her. I could take her throat in my jaws and suffocate her until she was a heartbeat from death, then rip her open and swallow her heart as it struggled to beat, feel its muscular contraction inside me. The lungs next. Rich with blood. Slippery and dense. Then the shoulders.

But she didn’t move, and I didn’t move, and she was a

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woman again.

“Why?” Her hoarse voice seemed more human now. She didn’t know why she was still alive.

I didn’t, either. “Cold Wind. That was my first name, before people crossed the land bridge and I followed. Or perhaps I crossed and they followed, I forget. You think you’re old...”

I looked at the steel sculpture: huge, undeniable, but rust would eat it as surely as leaves fall in winter and dawn breaks the night open, and I would still be here. Alone. I had killed them all, because that was what I did.

“Get up,” I said.

“Why?”

“So you can run.”

Surely she wasn’t weary of life, not yet, but she began to lift her jaw, to offer her throat. Cats are faster than deer. I would catch her, and as young as she was, she felt it: this is who we were, this is what we did. It was the old way.

“Run. I won’t kill you. Not this year.”

Silence. “But next?”

Predator and prey. We were the last. I said nothing. And she was gone, running, running.

The stars shone bright but the moon was setting and more cloud was on its way, ordinary northwest cloud. The night was warming, the silence already thinning, traffic

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starting up again at the edges. By tomorrow the snow would melt, the cameras would work. But tonight it was still a white world where Deer Woman ran toward daybreak, and I had someone to hunger for.



NOTE

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