

Something in the Dark

by James Lynn Smith

Though attractive, Hethelyn Franke was often a loner. Not because she desired it, but her strange perspectives appeared to bother others. She kept most of this to herself, yet she craved a relationship in which she could be open. Now it appeared her latest beau, Will, would not be that someone.

“I know you have all these thoughts you want to share,” he said. “But I can’t follow half of them. You go on about how the cluster of white wildflowers in the park mirrors a cluster galaxy light years away from us. When I get close to those luscious lips of yours, you launch into speculation that all the material universe is conscious. Really?”

Hethelyn crossed her arms and forced a weak smile at the tall, bespectacled man standing before her. “Being happy stimulates my mind, Will. I see connections. There are lots of interesting analogies around us if you look for general patterns.”

“Analogies, patterns—That’s an example right there, the way you talk with these weird abstractions. So what’s the point? I thought you were hot when we met. A little different, but I figured it was an act. Wrong. Why can’t you enjoy dining at cozy restaurants, wearing fancy shoes, or planning a romantic getaway like other women?”

“I do appreciate those things, but they don’t monopolize my thoughts. I don’t know how many women you’ve met, but we’re not all fixated on the latest fads with shoes, makeup, and hair. Also, if I were looking for a sugar-daddy to take me to the Riviera, it wouldn’t be you.”

“Ouch, so I’m not rich. ”

“I didn’t mean it like that. For me, choosing friends or a lover goes beyond what luxuries they can afford.”

He brushed his dark, straight hair back with his fingers and sighed. “On that score, you’ve told me about a woman being your lover once. Maybe I didn’t need to hear it. Swinging both ways is a condition hard for me to get my head around.”

“It’s in the past, but I don’t have a *condition*. It all depends on personal chemistry, and for me it is rare, either way.”

“I never was good at chemistry. Anyway, I sometimes feel caressing you is like rubbing an avatar while your mind explores the next dimension.”

She flinched and looked away. “You don’t get me at all. Please leave now.”

When he left, she went to the bathroom, stared in the mirror, and muttered, “Attractive single woman with wavy blonde hair, eclectic tastes, and approaching middle age needs a lobotomy.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. *Why do I even bother?*

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Hethelyn Franke was bright, shapely, single, never married. When she traveled, men and some women would often approach her with lascivious intent. She didn’t understand what signals she might be sending. But after brief conversation they would find some reason to move on. Sometimes she regretted this, but not often. Relating to those who expected bimbo mentality and seductiveness in her every move was too much work.

She lived in an old, two-story house with a windowless attic above, willed to her by her late aunt. This aunt had been the only *close* relative. There were two others, a feeble, elderly grandfather on her mother’s side and a cousin she had never seen. Hethelyn’s parents had separated and reconciled before both died in an automobile accident when she was quite young. Her aunt, considerably older, had

become her custodian.

Hethelyn preferred public transportation to and from her job as media specialist at the city library. A two-year certification from a local community college was sufficient for her present work.

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Turning from the mirror, she went to the living room. The book she had been reading the night before was not on the side table where she left it. *Did Will take it? No, must have just misplaced it.* This was rare; she always knew where her books were. They helped her fantasize the reality she wished for. Often she thought her best relationships would always be imaginary.

Maintenance for the big house was too much for one person. She had closed off most rooms, covering furniture with sheets. When her book search reached the second floor, she saw it on the stairs leading up to the attic door. *How did it get here? I never go up there.*

Picking up the book, she remembered that last night she'd heard creaks in the house somewhere outside her room. When she first moved in, she made several calls to the police, thinking she heard an intruder. Officers came, inspected, and left with veiled implications about hysteria over sounds in an old house cooling off at night. *Do I really seem that loony?*

Hethelyn remembered that as a child she often sensed that nothing she saw was real; the whole world seemed a put-on. She had a feeling that her parents followed a script meant to deceive her. They might not even be real themselves. *Am I alone in having those thoughts?* She found that, expressed aloud, such notions made people wonder about her.

In her mind she could hear her aunt's thick German accent; "*Himmel*, girl, this old lady your deep thoughts frighten. *Ja*, a philosopher you need." An image crossed her mind, possibly being grilled for her deepest, most honest thoughts by a

psychologist. *He'd think I'm off my rocker.*

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Yawning, she laid her book on the side table, turned off the lamp, and pulled the bed covers to her chin. Sleep would not come. Tonight Will had been uncharacteristically brusque. When they first met, he'd acted warm and interested in things she thought about. Was his attention pretense? Did he merely want a short conquest? In intimacy, she was responsive and had no reason to fake. Why did he feel she was somehow detached? Perhaps it was a contrived claim to cover his need to pull back from her.

She felt her throat tighten as tears wet her pillow. *Enough of this.* Hethelyn tried seeing her pain in larger perspective to ease the distress, a trick she learned from her aunt's late husband. He was a philosophy professor who also taught astronomy, and she called him 'Fessor.' *What is love?* She remembered asking and his answer.

"Some cosmologists claim all particles and forces come from the ether we assume as empty space, but each has an negative twin."

He paused for effect. "Extending that to consciousness, there will potentially be as much pain as pleasure. Though there might be no net positive or negative, existence is *desired* by some mysterious aspect of reality. This universe-maintaining desire, at a familiar level, is love, aspiring for positive experience, despite its opposite."

Fessor's teleological theories did not eliminate sadness, but helped her feel less alone. Great minds had grappled with the same hurt as she.

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An hour later, Hethelyn fell asleep and dreamed of being in a large library with people milling around but not speaking. No one noticed her as she tried to find her bed. Not only was she confused, but saddened by a vague sense of loss.

Still searching, she saw a glimpse of the bed behind a partly opened door and approached. Beside it was a set of rickety shelves with glassware and ceramic figurines. The shelves were slanted and a glass bowl began to slide. It fell to the floor with a crash, shards scattering.

She awoke with the noise and realized she had been asleep. *That crash, like glass breaking.* Throwing covers back, she stood in the darkness. *Was it only a dream?* Determined not to be a passive victim, Hethelyn retrieved a baseball bat in the corner and cracked her door open, listening. Not hearing anything for several minutes, she turned on her room light and went down the stairs to the main floor. There was glass on the kitchen floor. It was not a broken windowpane. The cabinet door was open where she stored drinking glasses. *But I'm careful putting dishes away. How could...?* To fortify confidence, she yelled, "Who's there?" As expected, there was no answer and she busied herself cleaning up the breakage.

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After dinner and putting dishes away the next evening, she felt reading would take her mind off Will. Sitting on her couch, she turned on the table lamp and became engrossed in an adventure. A few minutes later a sound distracted her. It seemed to be outside, yet somehow a part of the house. After going upstairs and retrieving her baseball bat, she looked out the front door window. It was nearly pitch black. *Something in the dark.* Switching the living room light off so opening the door would be less noticeable, she went onto the porch. The scraping sound seemed to come from above the porch. Walking outside, she turned into the side yard and looked upward at the second floor veranda outside an unused guestroom. In the light of stars and a crescent moon, Hethelyn saw branches from the limb of a massive oak tree rubbing against the veranda in the breeze.

The tension in her chest and belly relaxed. Lightning in the distance suggested an approaching thunderstorm, and she watched, fascinated. *Some think*

it's weird but I perk up with bad weather.

However, the storm diverted and she went back inside. After reading another chapter, she retired for the night.

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A tiny spot in the darkness drew her attention. Anticipating an act of enormous magnitude, she felt a presence with her, communicating. The voice was soft and feminine, yet seemed an agent of power. "Divine Desire searching for the moment of release," it said. A point of incredible brightness burst forth, expanding light into the fullness of her vision. "The moment of creation, unfolding of paired entities into separate natures." A loud chorus rang out with cords both beautiful and terrifying. "Rending into opposites is an agony only Supreme Desire can endure. The price, my dear, for the small, warm comforts of love."

Opening her eyes, Hethelyn lay still for several minutes. She looked at the clock and crawled out of bed. The dream was still fresh, mysterious and meaningful in a way she could not explain. *Maybe Fessor sent that dream.* Though inexplicable, it urged action. Now was the time to finish with Will and get on with her life.

Before leaving for work, she phoned Will, knowing he left earlier in the morning than she did. The recorder on his phone beeped. "Will, please mail me the house key I gave you. It's obvious we travel different paths. I'll be expecting it."

That evening she returned from her library work and went to her computer to check email. One was from Will, not what she expected.

Hethelyn: I am truly sorry for the way I lashed out. I was feeling edgy about something and it made me impatient and irritable. In truth, I am happy you are different. I would like to renew our connection, and I will not let your previous

treatment or confinement become a problem to our relationship. Please forgive me. —Will

There was no mention of returning the key she asked for. She read the message again and said aloud, “What ‘treatment or confinement?’” Thinking of strange events she told him about, there was never any mention of such things. She wondered if he were on the level or confused about her past. His message implied she had been institutionalized and blocked it from memory. *I know I’m different, but not insane.*

Puzzled and disturbed, she tried to see it from a different perspective. Her composure collapsed at the next chilling thought. *Perhaps he’s the insane one.* She imagined he might have a split personality, all along mistaking her for someone he met in the past or when confined to an institution. Perhaps he had been sneaking in her house, and, like a stalker, deliberately causing events that would disturb her. *Why would he do that?* Since she told her coworkers about mysterious things always happening, they might think she was mentally disturbed. If something happened to her, testimony to police could give the impression she was imbalanced, even suicidal, and that would deflect suspicion from Will.

Sleep did not come easily and she was listless and inefficient at work the next day.

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That afternoon, after leaving the bus stop and heading home, she heard a buzzing sound, like a chainsaw. *Tree surgeons on my property?* As she neared her house, however, the sound stopped. She walked into her side yard and everything seemed normal. The huge oak was still there and no workmen around. *Must have been on someone else’s property. But still...*

Hethelyn now realized her nerves were fragile, prompting her to seek

security. A pistol, but what kind and how to get it, she had no idea. She would also need some training. Remembering a store that sold firearms near the mall, she decided to visit, inquire, and make a plan.

The next two days required her to work overtime and she had no chance to initiate her plan.

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It was late when she retired. Though exhausting, work had separated her from concern about Will. With anticipation of deep, restful sleep, she welcomed the soft, plush pillows and high thread-count sheets. Pulling the chenille spread to her chin, she hoped for slumber with no dreams, except possibly flying. She even forgot to turn the bed lamp off and was soon fast asleep.

After an hour of sleep she heard it. A typical noise for the old house, and she wanted to ignore it. But there was a question about the bed lamp. *Did I turn it off? ...No I didn't.* When she opened her eyes, her room was dark. *What?* Looking at her radio clock, which had no batteries, only a plug, nothing showed. *Power failure?* She sat up and looked out the window; in the distance she saw her neighbor's yard light, fully functional. Hethelyn scrambled for the phone beside her bed. It was dead. Her cell phone was in her purse, but as she hastened out of bed, a creak from the stairs indicated little time to act. *Something in the dark.* Stumbling to the corner she grabbed the bat, wondering if she should run or stay. *Surely he knows where my room is.* Now steps coming up the stairs grew louder.

She jerked her door open and ran through the hall toward the unused guest room. *Hide under furniture covers.* With forceful, quick footsteps behind her, she burst into the room. Slamming the door, she twisted the lock, dashed across the room and dove under the cover draped over a hall tree. Heavy pounding on the door preceded an abrupt, inward crash. Then she heard nothing except the intruder's breathing. *Searching the dark?* Hethelyn raised one corner of the cover

and peeked out. Barely visible, a tall figure stood with something on the face. *Night Goggles?* She tried to restrain her breath, but was unable to quieten lungs aching for air. Footsteps moved toward her. *He's found me.*

Throwing the cover back, she ran to the glass-paned door leading to the veranda. She burst through, breaking the flimsy latch, then realized her mistake. *Trapped, no way out.* The intruder walked onto the veranda, forcing her back into a corner against the rail. She gripped the bat, raising it upward.

“Why, Will?” she cried. “Take off your mask. What’s driving this frenzy?”

No word came from the figure. He continued to approach, raising gloved hands from his sides.

Hethelyn sensed the hands aiming for her neck. She swung the bat, knocking his left arm back and displacing his night vision headgear.

“Ow! Damn you, bitch,” he snarled in pain. It was not Will’s voice. For better view, he tore his headgear away.

“Who are you?” she said, hoping talk would allay anger.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “You’re in my way. Grandpa outlived everybody in the family but us two, and now he’s on his deathbed. My mom took care of the old bastard for years and then she died with a heart attack from the strain. But earlier she had found the will and told me what would happen when he died.”

He feigned a lunge, and when Hethelyn raised the bat again he snatched it away and tossed it aside. Anger in his voice, he continued, “Though he owes me for what she did, the modified *per stirpes* clauses of his will lists you as sole heir if mom died before him. Said I was a bad egg and couldn’t handle money. The will deprives me of everything...unless something happens to you.”

Confusion rushed through Hethelyn’s mind. She hardly knew her grandfather. He had little contact with his offspring and this man must be her seldom mentioned cousin. “I didn’t know anything about this. I have no problem

sharing—”

“A share? I want it all. The entire family treated me like scum, and I’m glad most of ‘em are dead.”

Hethelyn sensed he enjoyed his cruel advantage and needed to vent. Maybe she could buy time with talk. “If anything happens me, you’ll never get away with it. Somebody will tell.”

“Hah, like your library friends who think you are strange and a boyfriend who now thinks you’re creepy nuts?” He grinned. “You’re in deep emotional turmoil, enough to be suicidal.”

“How could Will think I am ‘creepy nuts?’”

“An anonymous email I arranged informs him you’re dangerous. An attached copy of realistic looking documents commit you to a mental institution for acts such as cutting your friends and setting fire to a relative’s bedroom.”

Now she knew why Will wanted to back off. “Police can disprove all that.”

“Only if they bother to look past ample reasons for suicide. We’ve had two in our family already. I’m betting the law wants quick, simple answers to unnatural deaths. If they *do* look further, I have a lot of practice being invisible when I want.” He bristled with impatience and reached for her. “Enough.”

She spun and scrambled over the rail. *Got to jump*. Placing heels on the veranda floor edge, she held the rail from behind and faced outward. *Oh no*. Downward was the hard, concrete patio. Branches of the oak tree limb were close, but looked insubstantial. Then he grabbed her right hand. Struggling, Hethelyn wrenched it loose, bent her knees, and sprang outward with all her might.

She barely caught the branches, but strove hand-over-hand until she could swing a leg over the limb and climb atop it. Carefully she moved toward the junction of limb and trunk while fuming and cursing exploded behind her. Glancing back, she saw him standing on the veranda rail, preparing to leap onto the

same limb. Gone too far to back down, he would be heedless of danger and powerful. He could jump farther onto the limb than she did.

A thump and loud rustling of branches meant he landed behind her. She looked back and saw fury grasping and crawling toward her. Then he paused, quizzically, at a loud crack in the limb section between them. His body swung downward from her, still holding, then releasing the outer part of the limb, as it broke away and fell toward the patio below. First to hit was his body, second was the heavy mass of the outer limb impacting on top of him.

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Alternately struggling and clutching as she descended, Hethelyn spotted a soft landing area and dropped to the ground. She looked toward the driveway, now bathed in light from a patrol car. It entered and maneuvered over the lawn toward the patio. Another auto came immediately behind, which she recognized as Will's. Two policemen departed the patrol car and one directed his flashlight to her and then the man under the limb.

The second officer called for an ambulance and hurried to the fallen man. "Jeez, he's a goner."

"Ms. Franke, can you explain what's happened here?" The first policeman asked.

Will slammed his car door. "Hethelyn," he called, running to her. "I've been trying to call, but your phone wasn't working. I figured something was terribly wrong, considering things you told me about. So I called 9-1-1 and got the police to meet me here."

Looking at him, then the policeman, she felt an ache behind her eyelids. Then the sobs came, releasing long pent-up tears. Confusion, terror, and stress had taken its toll.

After a while, she calmed and explained about her cousin's break-in and its

surprising relationship to a grandfather's will. "...That's basically it. Now I need a minute, feel a little weak."

"Okay," said the policeman. "Take a break, we can continue later."

Will led her to the front porch steps and sat with her. "When we had our tiff, I was confused, spoke rashly, and I'm sorry. That morning, I had received an anonymous email with scans of documents attached. Looked like someone, maybe a past lover, was warning me about your once being put away for mental problems. Next day, feeling awful, I examined the documents more carefully. I don't know what real commitment papers would look like, but these were too simplistic. I eventually decided they were fake, and someone *was* stalking you or trying to freak you out."

"Why on Earth didn't you tell me?"

"Thought it might alarm you. You'd had enough to cope with. Plus, for days I was late getting home. In spite of that I looked at your house for ways someone unwanted might get in. The oak tree with that limb against the veranda was one way. Feeling it was urgent, I came over and began to saw it off before you came home, but noticed you coming when it was only half cut through. Figuring you might come unglued before I could explain, I took off."

"That partly cut limb held me when I jumped off the veranda, but my madman cousin was heavier. It broke with him and that saved my life."

"Too bad how it ended for him. But your cousin was crazed and dangerous."

Hethelyn took a deep breath. "I wonder where all his meanness goes now. Maybe it'll be pulled into a black hole like mass. That evil goes in, but does it come out in another universe, and, if so, is it changed?—Oops, odd thoughts."

He smiled and put his arm around her. "I live for your odd thoughts. Can't wait for the next chapter."

She leaned toward him and smiled. "I ought to visit my grandpa before he's

gone. He was kind of reclusive, weird in fact.”

Will laughed. “Maybe that’s where you get it from. You two might have a lot in common—if he’s weird *enough*.”

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