

## THE WALK HOME

By

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“That was the best game we’ve ever had!”

Ellyn had drowned in a shallow pond during a fit of convulsive laughter after only eight short but love-filled years lived with her parents, so she now existed in a state of perpetual grace. It was *always* the best game they’d ever had. As Moira smiled down at her, with indulgence but in agreement, her cheeks flaked into cobwebs, then drifted out into the night like twin pennants of frosty breath from underneath her bonnet. The effect was so apt to this winter evening’s walk that she could have been mistaken for a living, breathing thing. Seeing that the little ghost was fit to burst from excitement, Moira let go of her hand. Ellyn skated on ahead a few steps across the trackless snow then did, indeed, burst—into a hundred glowing green firefly tails, dizzyingly swirling about each other. Moira released a laugh like a chorus of owls, far away.

“That Mr. Graff is so funny!” Ellyn’s voice announced from nowhere. “Where do you think he comes from?”

“Mr. Graff came with the circus, during the depression,” Moira answered quietly. She continued forward, her hands folded across her apron, knowing the little one would follow.

“But *where* did the *circus* come from?”

“Wherever it will, I suppose. That’s what Mr. Graff sometimes says. Now, when or where Mr. Graff joined up with the circus... well, I suppose we’ll probably be risen up again at the end of days before he’ll tell us that.”

A hundred small stars of algae raced past the hems of Moira’s skirt and coalesced into Ellyn’s form atop a narrow tree-trunk, a sprite on a stark, dead dais. “Mr. Graff let me dance on his toes, like my daddy used to. Did you see?” Ellyn asked. She lifted her feet clumsily in alteration, her arms stretched out to an invisible partner.

“I saw,” Moira replied.

Ellyn stopped dancing. She looked out from lowered brow and said coyly, “I saw you dancing with the corporal.” She giggled.

Moira lifted an eyebrow and grinned slightly as she passed Ellyn. “The corporal is a fine dance partner. He says I remind him of a girl from the USO.”

Ellyn hopped down and chased after Moira. “What’s a USO?”

“They were the girls who would dance with the soldiers before they went off to war.”

“Dancing is fun! I want to be a USO!”

Hollow birdsong again floated from Moira's mouth. "I should think you'd be happy enough as a little girl."

"I am! I am!" Ellyn confirmed with glee, skipping and twirling as they crested the hill. The pond waited before them, frozen, a glistening mirror for the moon. Moira looked at it with small despair, Ellyn took no notice. "I love the dancing and the stories!" she continued excitedly. "I like John Red Cloud's stories about the tricky rabbit best of all! And the game! I think those boys will remember us for a long time, don't you? I can't wait 'til we do it again! Ooo, I just want it so much!" Ellyn clenched her fists, then threw her arms across her chest and twisted back and forth while she raised her face to the heavens.

Moira saw a pair of eyes flash between the trees. A great stag caught her glance, bucked, and ran.

"Until then you can think about all the good times you had tonight," Moira offered.

"I can! I *can* think about all the good times. It will be just like dreaming!"

Ellyn turned and ran back up the rise. Moira was too startled to call after her: Ellyn was never petulant about her rest--though Moira considered she might like it if Ellyn did resist for a little while. She soon saw that that was not Ellyn's intent, however, as the girl turned back towards the pond again and called wildly, "Moira! Watch me!" Ellyn threw herself, face-forward, down the slope, squealing. Her arms flared out and formed a ship's wake. Her ethereal spray rolled forward into a ball, surging and flowing, finally re-

concentrating into her familiar form at Moira's feet. Ellyn raised straight up as if a puppeteer high above pulled her strings.

"Did you see?" she asked Moira.

"I saw," Moira replied.

They came to the edge of the pond. Moira could see her husband's blurred form waiting behind a tree around the other side. His right arm was cocked behind his back; she knew he held the hammer.

"Can I skate for awhile before I sleep? Will you watch me skate?" Without waiting for an answer, Ellyn drifted out onto the pond and glided through a series of curves, a swath of filigree trailing behind her, disintegrating.

"I love to watch you skate," Moira said, mostly to herself. She settled onto the rough-hewn bench where Ellyn's father stills sometimes sat, looking out across the pond. Moira knew he was unwell. Would he know to come for her, she wondered. Moira knew she would miss this impish angel if ever they were to separate. But might not she finally pass on as well? Had she stayed overlong to play guardian to Ellyn? She dismissed these thoughts as inconsequential: Moira knew that if Ellyn's father did not come for her, she would never abandon the girl, even if she must endure ceaselessly that other thing, the unchanging re-enactment of brutish violence. Her husband's form remained unchanged, but the pull of the black void emanated more strongly from him; calm and sedate as he appeared, something shuffled in agitation, some dread vibration beckoned from the other

side of the pond, steadily growing more insistent

Moira looked away. Ellyn was no more than a wash of light now, her peals of laughter faded to the tinkling of icicles in the wind. Soon the girl was gone, and a small glowing dome sank slowly beneath the ice in silence. Moira rose and began walking. She looked forward, only forward, trying to ignore the presence hounding her and the inevitable fear welling up inside. A plume of cedar smoke billowed from a chimney up ahead. She saw the silhouette of Ellyn's father as he drew the curtains closed against the cold.