

## MARGARET NIVEN

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Oil on Paper, 72 x 42 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTO CREDIT: R.R. JONES.

## DALY WALKER

### At the Door

**A**n angry fist beat against the door of Harold's log cabin. The noise awakened him from a recurring dream. In the dream, his deceased wife, Marge, was still alive but for some unknown reason she had disappeared. Harold went from room to room in a big empty house desperately calling her name. But there was no answer. Now the fist banged harder. The window glass rattled.

Since Marge's death, the ninety-three-year-old retired doctor lived alone deep in a hardwood forest on a narrow gravel lane four miles from his nearest neighbor. He slept naked. His once wavy dark hair had thinned and whitened. He had let it grow long, and he tied it back in a ponytail. His body was lank, tough and lean as a strip of jerky. But his pale and ancient skin hung on his frame in pleats like an oversized garment. Harold had been a busy and beloved family physician, someone who saved lives and brought comfort to his patients no matter their station in life. Now he believed his greatest accomplishment was survival. Groggy, Harold thought it must be Marge at the door. She's come back, Harold thought. His heart leapt.

"Wait a minute, dear," he said. "I'll let you in."

But as the haze of sleep lifted, he remembered she had been gone for five years. Harold rolled onto his side. The old doctor squinted at the luminous numbers of the clock beside the urinal on the bedside stand. It was one thirty. He lay still and listened. The pounding grew louder.

"Stop it, for Christ's sake" Harold muttered. "Be quiet and leave me alone."

Normally Harold wasn't afraid of threats from the external world. What he feared were the inner ravages of old age like losing his memory, or becoming blind with macular degeneration so he could no longer see the dogwood and redbud blossoms in the spring, or otosclerosis that would steal his ability to hear the barred owl whose call to him at night asked, "Who cooks for you?"

But now a suffocating dread coiled around Harold's chest. Cold sweat beaded his brow. He sat up and listened. Although he didn't believe in a God who meddled in the lives of individuals, he said a prayer for whomever was at the door to just leave. The knock crescendoed.

Harold thought of calling 911, but his telephone hadn't worked since a thunderstorm a month ago. For a moment, he wished he still had his double-barrel Winchester 21,



but with old age, he had changed his thinking about guns and killing living creatures. Once an avid hunter, he no longer could shoot a bird let alone a human being even if his own life was threatened. Marge's death had solidified his belief in not only the impermanence of everything but also the interconnections between all that existed. Harold was convinced that the entire universe was bound together with what caused it and what was around it. The pounding stopped. Harold closed his eyes. He waited. For a moment, he thought his hypocritical prayer had been answered. But the angry fist against the door shattered the silence.

Harold remembered that a few miles away on Plum Creek Road last week the body of a young college girl had been discovered. She had been bludgeoned to death with a big sandstone rock. A mailman had found her in a ditch in the fetal position with dark blood pooled under her head. A manhunt for her killer was on. Police and national guard troops were searching the vast forests of the county. Earlier in the day, Harold had heard the bark of their dogs echoing through the valley of his land. Was it her murderer at the door? His heart beat furiously. He reached over and touched the pillow where Marge's head had once rested. In his fingertips, he could feel the texture of her skin. He believed that in whatever form she existed she could still hear him when he spoke.

"Don't worry, dear," he whispered. "It's nothing to worry about. Just some poor soul who doesn't know where he is. I'll go talk to him. Get him headed in the right direction."

Harold swung his feet over the edge of the bed. He put on his thick wire-rimmed glasses and looked out the window. The sky was moonless and black. The darkness seemed to have swallowed the world and everything in it. A feeling of inevitability, of finality, descended on Harold. Darkness is where we begin, he thought. And where we end.

The pounding grew louder. Harold thought the panes would break. He considered climbing out the window and hiding on the roof over the laundry shed or locking himself in the bathroom. Sadly he knew it would merely prolong the inevitable. He pictured a tall black-clad figure carrying a large scythe at the door. Harold wondered if he was going crazy. He rose from the bed. His joints were stiff and painful. From a rocking chair, he picked up a pair of gray work pants. He pulled them on awkwardly and struggled to keep

his balance. He looped the suspenders over his shoulders. Harold put on a faded denim work shirt that Marge had given him because it matched the pale-blue color of his eyes. He groped through the dark to a fan-shaped window that overlooked the entry to the cabin. In spite his indifference to death, his pulse raced. A tingling prickled the back of his arms.

Harold looked out the bedroom's window. He blinked in the glare of a big pickup truck's headlights that were aimed at the cabin. Harold remembered reading that the man suspected of murdering the college girl may have driven a Ramcharger.

"What in God's name does he want with me?" Harold asked as if Marge were there. "I'm just an old man with nothing of value."

"Open up," a husky voice yelled.

Harold pried open the window. A gust of night air assaulted his face. The dark form of a big man stood at the door. The figure was tall and thick but a little stoop shouldered.

"Who are you," Harold yelled. His high-pitched voice cracked in midsentence. "What do you want?"

"I'm a deputy sheriff," the man called.

Harold didn't believe him.

"Step into the light so I can see you," he commanded.

The man moved back so that he was illuminated by the truck's headlights. He wore a campaign hat with a wide, flat brim like officers of the law wear. Harold squinted, trying to see him better. He couldn't make out the man's face or if he had a gun. The man held up his hand and waved something.

"Here's my badge," he said.

Harold couldn't see it either, but he said, "Okay, I'll come down and let you in."

Clutching the rail, he descended the steps to the cabin's one-room first floor. He went to the door and turned on the porch light. He took a deep breath and opened it. In a pool of yellow light, the tall man stood with feet set apart and his hands on his hips. He wore a khaki shirt with epaulets and a zippered front. His wide belt holstered a big revolver. He pushed a silver star badge toward Harold.

"I'm Deputy Armstrong from the sheriff's department," he said.

Harold studied his face. Up close and in the light, he

was clean shaven with wide-set inquiring eyes and a big jaw. Harold thought he looked respectable, but he still wasn't convinced he was who he said he was.

"I'm Harold," he said, shaking the deputy's broad hand. He no longer introduced himself as *doctor* because it had been so many years since he was in practice, he believed he didn't deserve the privilege anymore.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir. But we got a 911 call from your number."

"How could that be?" Harold said. "My phone hasn't worked since that storm a month ago."

"Sometimes a broken line will short out and trigger a call. We've seen it before."

"I wish the damn phone company would come fix it," Harold said.

The man lowered his head. He looked around Harold and his eyes roamed the cabin.

"You sure you're all right?" he said.

"I'd be fine," Harold said, "if I could just get a good night's sleep." He stepped back from the door. "Since you're here, you might as well come in and have a drink."

"I'm on duty," Armstrong said. "I'll just have some water."

Harold led him to the pedestal oak table in the corner of the room. He turned on the Waterford crystal chandelier he had bought for Marge in Dublin on their twenty-fifth anniversary. Dusty light from its flame-shaped bulbs played on cobwebbed crystal prisms and shone on the deputy's face.

"Sit," Harold said. "Be my guest."

The officer found a ladder-back chair. He took off his hat and laid it on the table. Harold went to a sink crammed with dirty dishes. He filled a Ball jar from the tap. With a trembling hand, he set it in front of the officer. Then he poured himself a glass of red jug wine and sat across from the deputy.

"I thought you were the man who killed the girl over on Plum Creek," Harold said.

"We caught that guy today," Armstrong said. "You don't have to worry about him anymore."

The deputy looked around the room that Marge had furnished with tasteful family heirlooms and folk art. On a worn Navajo rug that covered the cherrywood floor were fragments of acorn shells that chipmunks had left.

A walnut bookshelf held Marge's favorite books with their yellowed pages—*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Sheltering Sky*, all of Flannery O'Connor's stories, Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Harold had read them to her in the latter stages of her illness when she was too weak to read herself. On the mantel of a stone fireplace were two duck decoys and a metal cricket. The brass bucket for kindling on the hearth was empty. Everything looked faded and old and was covered with a film of dust.

"This is quiet a place," Armstrong said.

"You should have seen it in Marge's day," Harold said. "I don't keep it up like she did."

"How long have you been here?"

"About thirty years. We lived in Airstream trailer down by the pond while the cabin was being built. Billy Wheeler, who owned a sawmill up the road, helped me lay these poplar logs. But I did a lot of the work myself—the chinking, the roofing." Harold paused for a drink of wine. He felt like talking, and the deputy seemed to want to listen. "I had just come through a rough patch. A kind of nervous breakdown you'd call it. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think, couldn't focus on anything. I was a doctor then. My patients became like windows I was looking through. I was pretty much a mess. Marge said I needed to be where it was quiet so my mind could heal. That's when we bought the property."

Harold was quiet for a few seconds, remembering the evenings he and Marge had spent in a swing on the cabin's porch. Sipping white wine. Discussing their days—what Marge had painted or harvested from her garden, the bridges and stone walls Harold had built, what they were reading. Sometimes they just sat without talking, swinging gently, while holding hands. Their life together in the near wilderness seemed timeless to Harold—as if it were the only life he had ever led or wanted to lead.

"Marge was right," Harold said. "Working with my hands. Living close to the land. Stone. Wood. Water. There was something elemental about it. Something tactile and authentic. It made me feel my life was worth something again. I actually began to look forward to the next day and the day after that." Then Harold added. "I loved my work here the way I once loved medicine. I just wish I still had the strength do all the things I enjoy. But that's how it goes."

Something about the way the officer listened made

Harold wonder if he already knew the story. A silence followed. Harold was afraid the man was going to excuse himself and leave.

"I'll bet you're hungry," Harold said. "I have some cookies. Let me get you a cookie."

Harold rose from his chair and went to a Hoosier cabinet where he found the bag of sugar cookies he had purchased at the bakery in town a week ago. He put them on a saucer. His hand trembled when he set the cookies on the table.

"My life has sure had its ups and downs," he said. "And plenty of regrets. But for the most part it's been a good life."

"Exactly how old are you?" Armstrong asked.

"As old as the hills," Harold said. "Ninety-three to be exact."

"Wow. That's quite an accomplishment."

Harold shook his head.

"Old age isn't an accomplishment," he said. "It's an ordeal. It's like flying an airplane through a thunderstorm. Once you're in the tempest and being tossed around you can't bail out. You just keep flying and try to be smart about it." He traced the rim of his glass with a finger. "You're lucky, son. You're young and strong with a lot of good years ahead if you mind your p's and q's."

"Hope you're right," the deputy said. "Mind telling me what happened to your wife?"

"Cancer," Harold said. "It was what they call a small-cell carcinoma. It started in her lungs and spread from there. Chemo and radiation didn't work. I took care of her here at the cabin until the end. It's where she wanted to be."

Harold remembered Marge the night she died and a sadness welled up in him. Delirious with pain, she had fallen when she tried to get out of bed. She had lain on the floor disheveled and exposed with her nightgown up around her waist. Her skin was deeply jaundiced. He muscled her bulky body back onto the bed. He slipped a down pillow behind her head and told her he was sorry he had hurt her. Then he gave her morphine with a medicine dropper until she let out a little sigh and quit breathing.

"She was cremated," Harold said. "I hired a crop duster to spread her ashes over the land. She loved it here as much I do. She knew where all rare wildflowers grew and where the morels were."

Harold pointed to a series of botanical watercolors that hung on the log wall behind the deputy. There was a Siberian iris. A fiddlehead fern. A red maple leaf with a curled edge.

"That's Marge's work," he said reverently.

Armstrong rose from the table. While he studied the paintings, Harold pictured Marge in her studio over the barn. She was at her easel, her long, white hair in a blue bandana. An opera was playing on the radio. Her smock was a paint-smudged white lab coat Harold had worn when he saw his patients. Harold's rheumy eyes glistened. He wiped them with the back of his hand.

"Look at the veins in those leaves," the deputy said. "I love the detail. They look so real."

"She was a fine artist," Harold said. "And she was a fine woman. I loved almost everything about her."

"I'm sure you miss her." The deputy sat back down. "Did you have children?"

"No," Harold said. "We weren't lucky that way. It was a medical situation."

"So you're alone way out here in the middle of nowhere."

"I've got the flora and fauna to keep me company," Harold said. "I have lunch every day with two finches. They always let me pick up the tab." Harold took a drink of wine. He closed his eyes, savoring the memories of Marge. "You probably think I'm demented. But I'm different than most folks. This is the kind of life I like. It's what keeps me sane."

"How long do you intend to stay out here?"

"As long as I can. I don't make plans. I guess you'd say my forward-looking days are behind me."

"Don't you get lonely?"

"Sure. At times. But then sometimes it's loneliest when there are people around." Harold paused for a moment. He looked out the window at a dark sky. He could hear the barred owl, its plaintive call mocking the night. "It's not that I don't like people. I do, but not swarms of them and all their buzz. What I like more than anything out here is the silence of the land."

The deputy nodded as if he understood. Then he looked at his wristwatch.

"I need to report in," he said. He raised the Ball jar. "Here's to you, Harold. A man of independence, longevity, and grit."

"Longevity for sure. What's the old joke? If I had known

I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself."

The deputy chuckled. He drained his glass and set it on the table. Harold was feeling warm from his wine. He wanted Armstrong to stay and talk some more.

"Sure you don't want something else to drink? A little glass of wine would go well with another cookie."

"Thanks, but I'm still on duty."

The deputy rose and put on his hat. He creased its brim with his fingers.

"I'll see to it your phone gets fixed, pronto," he said.

"I'd appreciate that."

"I'll come by and check on you once in a while. If you don't mind."

"That would be fine, too," Harold said. "Just don't show up in the middle of the night."

The officer smiled. He turned and headed to the door. Harold followed him.

"You a fisherman?" Harold said.

"Yeah," the deputy said. "I guess you could call me a fisherman."

"Fly or spin casting?"

"I prefer fly-fishing."

"Good man," Harold said. "Maybe you'd like to come out and try your luck. The ponds are well stocked with bass and bluegill."

"I'd like that," Armstrong said. "I've got a boy who likes to fish. Maybe I'll bring him along. You can teach him to fly cast."

Harold thought back to eighty years ago when his father first brought him to these rugged hills in a Model A Ford. He had taught Harold how to bow hunt for deer and bass fish up the road in Yellow Wood Lake. How wonderful that had been, how it had changed his life and the way he considered the Earth.

"Bring him out," Harold said. "I've got rods you can use. I make the rods myself. They're bamboo. I split the cane with a special knife." He said that although he hadn't made a fly rod since Marge died and his tremor worsened. "I'll get one and show you. They're in the barn."

"I'll bet they're dandies," the deputy said. "I'd like to see them, but I've got to hit the road." He touched his hat.

"Good night, Harold. You take care."

"Good night. Thanks for stopping by."

The man shook Harold's hand and went to his truck. Harold slid the dead bolt into its receptacle with a reluctant, metallic click. He turned off the chandelier. Slowly he climbed the stairs. He paused a second to rest halfway up. He couldn't believe how weak his legs were. Harold's ninety-three years had taught him it was better not to count too much on things, but something told him he would soon see the man again. Harold entered the bedroom. He felt very tired. Without bothering to take off his clothes, he climbed into his side of the bed. He lay in the dark. His breathing was slow and even. He heard the truck pull away. The drone of its engine. The crunch of tires on gravel. The sounds stopped briefly, then resumed and soon faded away. The silence that remained was deep and complete. No breeze in the leaves. No insects pinging the window. No owl calling out. The logs of the cabin seemed to let out a sigh.

Harold rolled toward Marge's side of the bed.

"See, dear," he said. "I told you. Nothing to worry about. He seemed like a nice guy. He's going to come fish someday."

Harold looked beyond the bed out the arched window. Two stars had appeared in the black sky. A nimbus of creamy light surrounded them. Like a magician's scarf, a cloud drifted by and made them disappear. When they reappeared they seemed brighter and more clearly defined. Harold believed that Marge was one of the stars and he was the other. There was a chill in the air. It occurred to him that winter was coming soon and he wasn't prepared. He closed his eyes and hoped for the strength to cut and split a rick of firewood in the morning.

**Daly Walker** is a retired surgeon. His fiction and essays have appeared in numerous literary publications including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Southampton Review*, *The Sycamore Review*, and *The Catamaran Literary Reader*. His collection of short stories, *Surgeon Stories*, was published by the *Louisville Review's* Fleur-de-lis Press.