

Ned spoke. Night was aged an hour or two; the rare excitement of twilight had long since passed. He parted his lips and spoke. A voice coming out slowly, quietly, and yet firmly. "Can I have some covers?"

A grunt issued from the depths of an aged comforter. The red and white patchwork rustled slightly.

Tilley's grip on the comforter loosened. Ned softly tugged, pulling it over his thin body as he slid closer to Tilley, putting his back against hers. She felt his spine on her back. They were warm.

The air was cool that night. A stiff breeze had blown through the countryside that afternoon carrying away the clouds. Night became an emptiness stretching out across lonely fields, separated here and there with small clumps of trees. The stars shone down like snow falling from a heaven too high, always falling but never landing. It was a cloudless country sky glistening with stars, as only the country sky can. Ned and Tilley would never know. To them, the crystal sky, giving a deep and broad view into the chilly depths of space, meant nothing more than a cold night of tugging back and forth on the comforter.

"My bones ache, Ned." Her wrinkled hands rubbed her arm with a slight shake.

"I know, Tilley, I know," he sighed. "It's this night air."

Ned moved his foot beneath the comforter. Their heels touched; the worn leathery skin of his heel bore no warmth to her foot. She pulled her foot away, leaving his alone beneath the covers. The wind howled eerily as it spiraled down the chimney, stirring the ashes in the kitchen fireplace. The dry air of the kitchen shifted over an open book. A page turned in the darkness. A shiver passed through Tilley and into Ned. She moved her foot back.

An owl called out from across the cottage's yard as a gust of wind blew over Ned's farm, across the fields, and against the house. Empty fields glowed in the soft light of the pale full moon. The field mice stirred. Quick breathing shadows unnerved their furry little brown bodies and sent shivers through to their bones. It was a familiar fear rising from the tips of their skinny tails to fill their bodies with a new and unknown sense of danger. The dark shape of an owl floated across the pale full

moon and disappeared into the west as though trying to follow the night in its endless circle around the Earth.

“Your back is warm, Ned.”

“Mhmm.” The attic rafters groaned quietly in the silence.

“Tea would feel good tonight. Don’t you think, Ned?”

“Aye. The steam soothes the muscles and quiets our ears to the sounds of the night.” There was no movement beneath the red and white patchwork. The air was still.

“Yes. Tea would be quite nice.” The thought seemed to carry her off.

The wind flooded down from the cold empty sky into the fields, its icy fingers slipping and prodding into the nest of the field mice. An owl’s cry reached out to the night flitting through empty fields. So many little bodies were pushing and scurrying toward the heat and safety of the nest. One too many wrestled in the glowing warmth of the nest. A mouse tumbled out. The night was dark around the lone mouse. That new and unknown shiver raced deeply through its bones again. A fleeting shadow dropped from above. The mouse was gone. The dark shape of an owl floated across the pale full moon and disappeared into the west as though caught up in the wake of midnight desperately trying to follow the night one last time in its endless circle around the Earth.

“You keep me so warm, Ned.”

“I know, Tilley, I know. It’s our tired backs against each other and our good hearts at peace that keep us warm.”

“The stars are so cold tonight,” she sighed as the wind whistled past their window.

“Always are, Tilley, always are.”

“Steaming tea is the only thing else I could want tonight.”

“Hmmm?” He blinked in the darkness. There was no movement beneath the red and white patchwork.

“I love you, Ned.”

“I know, Tilley, I know.” She felt his bony back pull closer.

All was still in the nest of the field mice. The grass drooped in the still weight of the autumn dew, too heavy for the feeble winds left to tumble about the country in the wee hours of the morning. The edge of night drew closer, the last of the owls floated off to the west. All was still in the bones of the lone mouse; the familiar shiver of death had settled with the heaviness of a deep sleep.

Ned and Tilley lay quietly. The night was dying around them. The warmth beneath the comforter finally brought weight to the lids of their eyes. Ned slipped away into still and warm slumber. Tilley lay another moment, smiling at the stillness of Ned’s thin body against hers. Then Tilley’s time came, and

as her aged eyes closed to the world, she watched the warm light of the rising sun creep across the floor. Sleep took Tilley as the first light of morning touched upon the comforter.