

I Could See The Smallest Things

by Raymond Carver

I was in bed when I heard the gate. I listened carefully. I didn't hear anything else. But I heard that. I tried to wake Cliff. He was passed out. So I got up and went to the window. A big moon was laid over the mountains that went around the city. It was a white moon and covered with stars. Any damn fool could imagine a face there.

There was light enough so that I could see everything in the yard – lawn chairs, the willow tree, clothesline strung between the poles, the petunias, the fences, the gate standing wide open.

But nobody was moving around. There were no scary shadows. Everything lay in moonlight, and I could see the smallest things. The clothespins on the line for instance.

I put my hands on the glass to block out the moon. I looked some more. I listened. Then I went back to bed. But I couldn't get to sleep. I kept turning over. I thought about the gate standing open. It was like a dare. Cliff's breathing was awful to listen to. His mouth gaped open and his arms hugged his pale chest. He was taking up his side of the bed and most of mine.

I pushed and pushed on him. But he just groaned.

I stayed a while longer until I decided it was no use. I got up and got my slippers. I went to the kitchen and made tea and sat with it at the kitchen table. I smoked one of Cliff's unfiltered cigarettes.

It was late. I didn't want to look at the time. I drank the tea and smoked another cigarette. After a while I decided I'd go out and fasten up the gate.

So I got my robe.

The moon lighted up everything – houses and trees, poles and power lines, the whole world. I peered around the backyard before I stepped off the porch. A little breeze came along that made me close the robe.

I started for the gate.

There was a noise at the fences that separated our place from Sam Lawton's place. I took a sharp look. Sam was leaning with his arms on his fence, there being two fences to lean on. He raised his fist to his mouth and gave a dry cough.

'Evening Nancy', Sam Lawton said.

I said, 'Sam you scared me.' I said, 'What are you doing up?' 'Did you hear something?' I said. 'I heard the gate unlatch.'

He said, 'I didn't hear anything. Haven't seen anything, either. It might have been the wind.'

He was chewing something. He looked at the open gate and shrugged. His hair was silvery in the moonlight and stood up on his head. I could see his long nose, the lines in his big sad face.

I said, 'What are you doing up, Sam?' and moved closer to the fence.

'Want to see something?' he said.

'I'll come 'round', I said.

I let myself out and went along the walk. It felt funny walking around outside in my nightgown and my robe. I thought to myself that I should try to remember this, walking around outside like this.

Sam was standing over by the side of his house, his pyjamas way up high over his tan-and-white shoes. He was holding a flashlight in one hand and a can of something in the other.

Sam and Cliff used to be friends. Then one night they got to drinking. They had words. The next thing, Sam had built a fence and then Cliff built one too.

That was after Sam had lost Mille, gotten married again, and become a father again all in the space of no time at all. Millie had been a good friend until she died. She was only forty-five when she did it. Heart failure. It hit her just as she was coming into their drive. The car kept going and went through the back of the carport.

'Look at this,' Sam said, hitching his pyjama trousers and squatting down. He pointed his light at the ground. I looked and saw some wormy things curled on a patch of dirt.

'Slugs,' he said. 'I just gave them a dose of this', he said, raising a can of something that looked like Ajax. 'They're taking over,' he said, and worked whatever it was that he had in his mouth. He turned his head to one side and spit what could have been tobacco. 'I have to keep at this to just come close to staying up with them.' He turned his light on a jar that was filled with the things. 'I put the bait out, and then every chance I get I come out here with this stuff. Bastards are all over.'

A crime what they can do. Look here,' he said. He got up. He took my arm and moved me over to his rosebushes. He showed me the little holes in the leaves.

'Slugs', he said. 'Everywhere you look around here at night. I lay out bait and then I come out and get them,' he said. 'An awful invention, the slug. I save them up in that jar over there.' He moved his light to under the rosebush.

A plane passed overhead. I imagined the people on it staring down at the ground.

'Sam', I said, 'how's everybody?'

'They're fine,' he said, and shrugged.

He chewed on whatever it was he was chewing. 'How's Clifford?' he said.

I said, 'Same as ever.'

Sam said, 'Sometimes when I'm out here after the slugs, I'll look over in your direction.' He said, 'I wish me and Cliff were friends again. Look there now,' he said, and drew a sharp breath. 'There's one there. See him? Right there where my light is.' He had the beam directed onto the dirt under the rosebush. 'Watch this,' Sam said.

I closed my arms under my breasts and bent over to where he was shining his light. The thing stopped moving and turned its head from side to side. Then Sam was over it with his can of powder, sprinkling the powder down.

'Slimy things', he said.

The slug was twisting this way and that. Then it curled and straightened out. Sam picked up a toy ????????? shovel, and scooped the slug into it, and dumped it out in the jar.

'I quit you know,' Sam said. 'Had to. For a while it was getting so I didn't know up from down. We still keep it around the house but I don't have much to do with it anymore.'

I nodded. He looked at me and he kept looking.

'I'd better get back,' I said.

'Sure,' he said. 'I'll continue with what I'm doing and then when I'm finished, I'll head in too.'

I said, 'Good night, Sam.'

He said, 'Listen.' He stopped chewing. With his tongue, he pushed whatever it was behind his lower lip. 'Tell Cliff I said hello.'

I said, 'I'll tell him you said so, Sam.'

Sam ran his hand through his silvery hair as if he was going to make it sit down once and for all, and then he used his hand to wave.

In the bedroom, I took off the robe, folded it, put it within reach. Without looking at the time, I checked to make sure the stem was out on the clock. Then I got into bed, pulled the covers up, and closed my eyes. It was then that I remembered I'd forgotten to latch the gate.

I opened my eyes and lay there. I gave Cliff a little shake. He cleared his throat. He swallowed. Something caught and dribbled in his chest.

I don't know. It made me think of those things that Sam Lawton was dumping powder on. I thought for a minute of the world outside my house, and then didn't have any more thoughts except the thought that I had to hurry up and sleep.