

The East Wind

and Other Short Stories

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The Still River

I think it must be one o'clock now.

...there is a full moon. If the clouds were not so thick the night would be lit up. Either there are no bulbs in the street lamps or the power is out. No signs of light in any of the buildings either. In the square and all around it, in every direction, it is dark. Nothing but darkness. It's more like a circle, a road running down its middle, cutting it in half. There are buildings on both sides.... One, two, three.... One—two—three, three narrow streets branch off from the road on this side and three on the other. There are pavements between the wide road and the buildings. Lamp-posts are fixed along the curb of each pavement. One here, one there. And there is a tree on each pavement. All the buildings are not the same. Some are high, some not. The dark roof of one building is visible; of another not.

No sign of movement in the thick, enchanting clouds. But their layers must be thinning here and there because every now and then it almost seems as if day is about to break. It almost seems as if wires of lightening are about to flash. Over there, between the second and third pavements, a dead bird is caught in the cables stretched from lamp-post to lamp-post.

Not a sound. There is no end to the silence of this half-night. No one is coming or going. No vehicle of any kind is passing by. No sound is coming from the buildings—no one coughing, no one talking, no child crying.... The clouds are not thundering. If the birds are settling in the trees for the night they are doing it with great care, their wings gathered.

Somewhere in the distance the clouds have started to rumble.... No. Some plane flying high up is coming this way.... No, it's some machine running in a factory... No. It's a car. But the lights are off. It's a jeep. It jumped up with such force. A wheel must have hit a pothole. Must have been going fifty or sixty miles an hour. A flash. The birds in the trees fluttered. You could see clearly if it wasn't so dark. But it looked like a gun. The barrel was shining even in this darkness. The driver turned very sharply. Trying to avoid something maybe.... A rock? A big pile of rubbish.... A person.... No. There is a traffic island right in the middle of the road. Not very high. That's why he didn't see it. He was trying not to hit it, that's why the driver turned so sharply.

A collision.... Backfire? Gunfire? The sound of backfiring... It couldn't come from that far away. By now it must be quite far away. If it was a bad collision the sound could carry this far. It could also be the sound of gunfire, or maybe there was an explosion.

Complete silence. No sound of a dog barking. No dog wailing with its head raised to the sky. Dense, hooded darkness. The clouds thick and enchanting, no sign of movement in them. The road deserted. The whole square deserted. No one is coming, no one is going. No car, no truck, no lorry, no rickshaw, no motorcycle is passing by. There is a hush in every direction. Not a sound from any building.... The sound of eating, crying, talking.... A door is opening or closing.... The clouds are not thundering; they are not rumbling. The air is still. No scrap of paper, no scrap of some old newspaper flying from this corner to that. It is dark and quiet.

Someone is coming. There is a sound of footsteps. It's coming from one of the three narrow streets on the other side. The sound of many footsteps in fact. Those who are walking, who are coming closer, are walking with measured steps. Carefully.... There is another sound with the footsteps. Someone is dragging something. Something heavy. The walkers stop again and again. You hear the sound, then it stops; then it comes again, then it stops. Footsteps, then nothing, footsteps, then nothing again. Is

anyone coming, is anyone watching, is anyone following them? This midnight becomes more bewitching still. Or perhaps they stop to rest, to catch their breath. When they come out onto the long, wide road from the narrow street, which is the second one of the three narrow streets on the right, the traffic island in the middle of the road will be right in front of them, and also the dead bird caught in the electricity cables.

One, two, three, four, five—there are five people altogether. They are carrying something. No, there are seven, eight, in fact. The last three have now come out of the narrow street on to the long, wide road and have joined the group of five. Together they have placed whatever it was that five of them, or maybe four, were carrying on to the traffic island and all eight of them have formed a circle and are standing around it. The circle has started to turn. The turning neither speeds up nor slows down, neither speeds up nor slows down, neither speeds up nor slows down. The turning suddenly stops. All eight are standing motionless. The faces of all eight are turned towards the thing they have placed on the island. All eight are standing silent in the darkness. The eight sit down. The whole circle sits down. Someone is weaving this midnight's magic. There is movement in the circle. The circle is breaking. One by one all eight of them are getting down from the island.

Three are on one side of the island, three on the other and two in front. All eight are bending down. All eight are straightening up. A wooden frame is slowly emerging from the darkness below and becoming visible in the darkness above. Its very lowest part is out of sight. This part is hidden by those who have raised the frame.... That is why the driver had turned the jeep so suddenly.... The frame is standing without any visible support.

Two men jump on to the island. One of them throws something in the air. A light appears near the highest timber of the frame, in the building to the right. In a window. The window is closed. Its drawn curtain is letting only some of the light come through. One of the men who is on the island has again thrown something up in the air. The light, coming from the

curtained window, is not strong enough to light up the whole square but it is enough to make it possible to see what it is that was thrown up in the air. As the rope went up in the air, its coils unwound and the last few coils came down as they opened over the uppermost timber of the frame. The end of the rope stopped and started to swing about a yard above the head of the man who had not thrown the rope and who had watched the rope rise up in the air and come down over the top of the frame. This man tried once, then once again to jump up and grab the end of the rope. But he couldn't reach it. The man who had thrown the rope whipped the end that was still in his hands once or twice. The swinging end of the rope came down a little and this time when the man who had not thrown the rope jumped, he managed to catch the end of the rope. He pulled the rope down with both hands. So far down that the end of it is no longer visible.

There is a curtain across the lighted window. There is a shadow behind the curtain. Motionless. The curtain is moving. The shadow is moving. The curtain has been pulled to one side, just a little. The shadow has been divided in two. Half behind the curtain and half in front of the curtainless part of the window pane. A man is looking out of the window. The curtain is pulled back. Now almost the whole shadow is in front of the curtainless window pane. The shadow is leaning forward a little and is looking at the scene on the traffic island on the road in front.

The rope is hanging from the upper timber of the frame. Half on one side, half on the other. But the ends are not visible. The two men who are on the island are bending down doing something. The rope keeps moving. The shivers of the night-goddess in its twists. A light goes on in a window of a building on the left. In a window on the second floor there is a curtain drawn across the window. There is the rustling of a bird in the tree in front of the window. A shadow has appeared behind the curtain. The curtain between the window and the shadow has been drawn back and the shadow is leaning forward a little, viewing the spectacle on the road. The hand of the shadow rises up and the light goes out. The two men who were kneeling down on the island stood up and went to that side of the frame

from which the rope was thrown. They took the part of the rope which was on their side and slowly started pulling it downwards with all four hands. That part of the rope which was on this side of the frame has become taut.

Lights have come on in other windows of other buildings on both sides of the road. There is a dim light in the window of a building close to the building on the right, in which the light had first appeared behind the curtain. The light is not coming from the room with the window but from across the room. There is no curtain. Two shadows are visible at the window. Light is coming from another window, directly below this one on the second floor, a curtain drawn across half of it. Only one shadow is visible at this window. Three windows in two buildings on the left are also lit up. These buildings are not joined to each other. There is another building in between. A window on its second floor is open. A head and neck are leaning out of it. The window with the head and neck is not one which opens in or out; it is a sash window which moves up and down. If the window which is raised fell right now, it would come down on the neck.

The two men who are on the traffic island are slowly pulling down on the rope and slowly the thing which they and their companions carried out on to the road is rising up in the air. A body is rising up in the air.

There are now lights and shadows in many windows on many floors in many buildings on both sides of the road.... A single shadow in one, two in another, in another three. Some of the windows are open and heads are leaning out from some of these open windows. But the lights are dim. So dim that they do not reach the centre of the long, wide road where the traffic island is.

The two men who are on the island are looking with upturned necks towards the top of the frame. The body is swaying slowly. The air is still. There is silence and at the centre of the road where the island is, it is still dark. The two get down. The end of the rope is still in their hands. They bend over and tie the end to something. Together, they give the rope one or two tugs and

then let go. The hanging body moves sharply. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. There are no signs of movement or struggle in the body. All eight are standing in a circle around the island.

Now there is light in almost all the windows of almost all the buildings on both sides of the road. One by one the shadows in the windows are disappearing. The heads are going back through the windows into the rooms. The birds are fluttering in the trees. There is the sound of doors opening and closing. But still there is a hush.

I think it must be one o'clock now.

A man appears on the corner of the first narrow street on the left. He stops and starts, stops and starts. He comes on to the road. Another man behind him. Two men have also come on to the long, wide road from the third narrow street on the left. All four are advancing towards the island. One by one three men come out of the second street on the right and on to the long, wide road. They too are carefully moving towards the island. You can't see their faces. You can't see the face of the hanging man either. You can't see anyone's face—not even one of the many people who are coming out of the six narrow streets and moving with hesitation towards the island. There are so many people but you can't hear the sound of anyone's footsteps. A ring of upturned necks is spreading around the island. Some people have stopped at the corners of the narrow streets and are looking at the hanging body from there. People are not talking to each other or if they are, they are doing it so quietly that you cannot hear them. It is dark around the island and around this darkness there is a circle formed by the arcs of dim light coming from the windows of the buildings. Beyond the buildings, there is darkness everywhere. The thick, enchanting clouds have spread a darkness over the sky. There is a hush in every direction, even in the middle of the long and wide road, although a crowd is gathered there.

The crowd becomes motionless. No one is moving from their place. Even the hanging body is no longer moving. There is a silence at the heart of the open square. A sound is coming from

somewhere far away. All the heads are now turned slightly. Some this way, some that. The sound is getting nearer. The sound of a car. Of a speeding car. Of several cars. Of cars coming from both sides. Signs of movement are appearing in the crowd. The circle is breaking. People are going back towards the narrow streets, some on this side, some on the other. They take three or four slow steps, then start running. People are running in every direction. They are disappearing into the narrow streets. The lights in the windows are going out. The sound of running footsteps, of cars nearby and far away, is filling the air. The birds are fluttering in the trees, windows are closing. You can hear the sound of doors closing. Darkness all around.

Two jeeps come from the direction in which the jeep had gone before and two from the direction from which it had come. All four break sharply. The jeeps are now standing across the long, wide road. Two here, two there. There are four or five men in each jeep. The headlights are not on. Some people are still standing near the island in the middle of the long and wide road. They are not moving. Some are looking towards the jeeps on this side, some towards the jeeps on the other. The men in the jeeps are also motionless. The sounds from a distance have also come close now. These sounds are coming from the narrow streets. There are also the sounds of cars, maybe of jeeps. And the sound of running and scrambling feet is mixed in with them. People are running and scrambling back into the long, wide road the same way they had disappeared, running and scrambling into the narrow streets. The cars have stopped just short of the corners of the narrow streets. They are also jeeps. The fronts of two jeeps are visible from about a yard of the corners of the first and second streets on the left. Their headlights are not on. Now no one is running out of the narrow streets on to the long, wide road. Those who have come are standing by the island in the middle of the road with those who did not run. Some of them look to the right, then to the left. Sometimes in front of them, sometimes behind. Some are standing absolutely still; others can't stand still. Some are still looking up at the hanging body.

Suddenly the bulbs in the street lamps come on. Now there is light everywhere. The corners of the narrow streets, the pavements and the long, wide road are all lit up. But the road is so wide and the bulbs are not that powerful. The middle part is still not fully lit up. The face of the body hanging on the island is still not visible. There are twenty, twenty-five, maybe thirty people near the island. They have come closer to each other now and are standing still.

People are getting out of the jeeps which have come to a stop in the three narrow streets on this side, and the three narrow streets on the other side. But you cannot see their faces, their clothes. They are standing in the thick darkness behind the bright headlights of the jeeps. These people are standing where they got out of the jeeps. No one is getting out of the four jeeps that are blocking the long, wide road on both sides. Light is flooding the area around the island where twenty-five or thirty people are standing motionless. But all around this light there is nothing but darkness. The sky, the trees, the windows of the buildings and the narrow streets. The people who have come out of the jeeps and those who have not come out of the jeeps are also in darkness. And the face of the body hanging on the island is also in darkness.

And the sound of gunfire is also coming from the darkness. The sound of birds fluttering their wings and flying away is also coming from the darkness. People are running. They are racing here and there. They are screaming. In the shadows. In the light. Someone is running around the island. Someone runs over there and then comes back this way. He staggers and falls. Gets up and then falls again. Several people are trying to crouch behind the island and are falling in a pile right there. Some remained standing where they were and fell where they stood. It seemed as if one man was about to raise his hands to the sky before he fell. Another kneels and remains kneeling for a while before he falls on his face. As if he was bending down in prayer.... One man flies up in the air as he runs and when his feet land on the ground again, he holds his stomach tightly with both hands and runs again. But after running four steps, he jumps up again and

this time his whole body lands on the ground. A man who was hiding behind the island suddenly leaps into the light and then disappears behind the island again. One man grabbed the wooden frame before falling. He is still holding on to the frame but his head is rolling back now. A man is lying facedown on the traffic island. This man's head and neck are hanging over the edge of the island and the rest of his body is on the island. The body looks headless. And another man whose body is not on the island but whose head is on it looks like a head without a body. On the long, wide road, on the part that is lit up and on the island, and all around the island, bodies are scattered, like live coals that have frozen over. Now there are no sounds of running and scrambling, or of screaming and crying, or groaning. There is a hush once again. The crack and snap of bullets has also stopped. Now everything is still. Beneath the open expanse there is the whisper of the dead. Only the body hanging on the frame is moving, with every gentle gust of air.

The headlights have gone off. Some men are getting down from the jeeps on either side and are moving towards the island, stumbling over the fallen bodies. Eight men in all. When they get close to the island these eight men raise their heads and look up at the hanging body which is moving slowly with every gentle gust of air. Two are right next to the is and and six behind them. These two men turn and give some signal to the six men. Four out of the six quickly jump past the body without a head and the head without a body and climb on to the island. The other two are untying that end of the rope which is not wrapped around the neck of the hanging man like a noose but which is tied to one of the timbers of the frame. These two men are releasing the rope very slowly, very carefully. Slowly, slowly, very carefully, the hanging body is coming down towards the four men standing on the island. These four men are wiping the palms of their hands on their clothes and raising their hands towards the feet of the hanging body. The rope is released a little more and the legs of the hanging body come within the reach of the raised hands. The upper part of the hanging body is now leaning at an angle. The legs are resting

on the hands of two of the men and the body on the hands of the other two. The hanging body is now resting on eight spread out hands and those men who had signalled to the six men are also on the island now. One of them is trying to loosen the noose by which the hanging body was swinging on the frame. But the noose is not coming free. The other man has also stepped forward and is helping him. But the noose is still tight around the neck. The first man takes something out of his pocket and the end of the rope with the noose which was thrown over the upper part of the frame begins to dangle in the air without the noose. As these two men come down from the island, the shoe or boot of one of them knocks the head without a body and the head rolls off the island and disappears into the darkness. Behind them the four men on whose eight hands the hanging body is resting get down from the island carefully. The two men, one of whom had cut the knot, are in front; behind them are the four men carrying the hanging body and behind these four men are the two who had loosened the rope. They are advancing slowly towards a jeep, stumbling over the bodies scattered on the road. When they have placed the hanging body, which still seems to have the noose around its neck, into the jeep and have climbed into their own jeeps, all the jeeps start up and set off.

I think it must be one o'clock now.

There is silence again. Not a leaf is moving. No scrap of paper, no scrap of some newspaper blown from here to there, from there to here by the wind. There is no sound of some dog barking or crying with its head raised to the sky. No plane is passing above. No car coming. The birds in the trees are not fluttering their wings. No sound of anyone coughing, clearing their throat, crying, or groaning. All the street lights have gone out at the same time. All of a sudden. Now you cannot see the scattered bodies on the long, wide road. But you can see the rope swinging on the wooden frame, the rope which had formed the noose around the neck of the body that the four men had carried away on their eight hands.

The windows of the buildings to the left and to the right are opening up. The curtains in the windows are being drawn back.

Light is coming out from the windows. Shadows are appearing in the windows. One here, two there, there three. There is the sound of doors opening and closing. People are coming out on to the long and wide road. They are looking at the scattered bodies. They are identifying them, sitting down next to them, bending over them, turning them over. They are picking them up and carrying them away. The dead bird is still caught in the electricity cables. The rope is still dangling from the frame. This night is the colourless smile of death. The long, wide, black road is completely clear now.

A jeep comes from over there and passes to the other side, missing the traffic island. The jeep has not gone far when there is the sound of an explosion. From the direction in which the jeep has gone. The sound of footsteps. The sound of several feet and with it the sound of something heavy being dragged, stopping and starting, getting closer. You can see shadows in the lighted windows. The birds are fluttering in the trees. The rope is swinging from the frame. People are slowly coming out of the narrow, dark streets and the long, wide, black road and are gathering around the traffic island. Their faces are turned towards the narrow street from which the mingled sounds of footsteps and something heavy being dragged are coming. They are waiting anxiously....

I think it must be one o'clock now.

(1985)