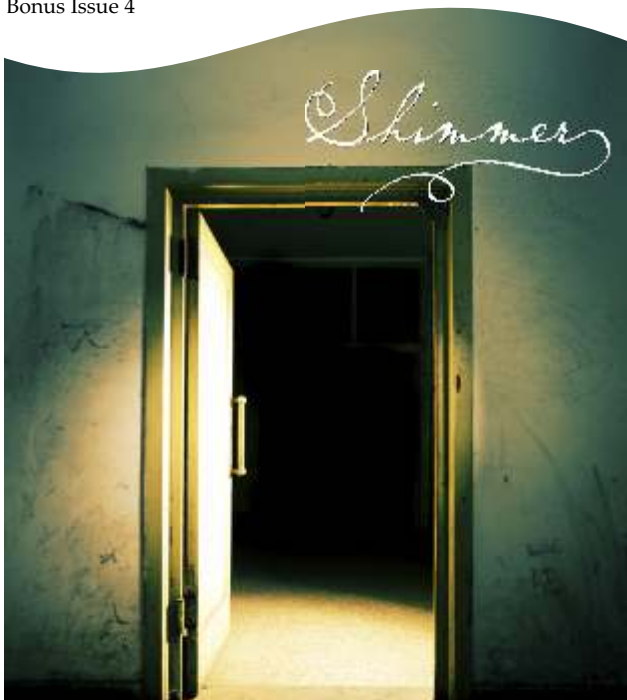


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THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR
BY KEN SCHOLES**

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Shimmer

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What Child is This I Ask the Midnight Clear

By Ken Scholes

It could have been snow, gently drifting down. It could have been virgin white and cold as cold. But it wasn't.

It was ash and the night wind was hot upon me.

That's what I remember now when I go out.

That first year when the world was on fire and we slipped over the broiling skin of it, we brave nine. We ran the course all night but found nowhere to land. For the first time ever I did not stop. Not one place. And all the while, as we slid through that broiling night, I kept humming that song. The one about the star, the star. Dancing in the night.

*For the first time
ever, I did not
stop. Not one
place.*

Tail big as a kite.

The end had come suddenly and they'd managed to do it to themselves. I'd always known they would.

I'm airborne now and the past falls away. The ash has long settled and it's really snowing again. We're not as loaded down as we've been in the past but that will come in handy later. Times have changed. The list has changed, too. And so has my work. Naughty and nice are blurrier now so I'm less meticulous in checking. I do the right thing, instead.

I don't have to crack any whips or give any whistles. We build speed to bend time around us. We'll do a year's work this night and then we'll sleep a while. I check the ammunition in my assault rifle and loosen the strings on my sack.

Then we start landing here and there and I'm out doing the right thing. Books for a library in Vancouver. Needles and a whetstone for a circuit rider in Laramie. We haul a starving family out of a dead mountain town in Oregon and assassinate a white supremacist who was building a skinhead army in Maine. A handful of twelve-gauge shells for Leonard in

Saskatoon. A bottle of aspirin in Bo Phut, Thailand.
And so on.

We're just turning north for home when we see the
light.

A star, a star, dancing in the night. Tail as big as a kite.

It builds and then blooms, a piercing white over the
horizon to the east. I shield my eyes and look
homeward, then back into the light. Is it a bomb?
Another crazy moving the world deeper into the hole
it has fallen in? Or a satellite falling from orbit? Either
way, it's worth looking into.

I steer east and take us low. As I draw closer, the light
shrinks to a concentrated point of brilliance and I aim
for it. We pick up speed and rip open space-time for a
split second. Then, we bear down upon the town that
sleeps beneath that unexplainable, spontaneous star.

There in the glory of that bright light, a child
screams.

She is not on my list. I've made no stops in this feral
country in over a decade. But I hear her screaming and
it is as piercing as the star above. I unsling my rifle and
we drop right there to hover over what used to be a

schoolyard. I don't know what I was expecting. Someone being harmed. Someone being carved up into pieces by primates gone horribly wrong. I work the lever and feel the solid clunk of a chambered round. Slipping my gloved finger around the trigger, I use my thumb to move the switch to three-round-burst and then I hit ground with a thud. I race across the open concrete, stepping over the frozen clumps of gray weed and watching my breath billow into the cold night air. The screaming stops. I hear heavy breathing instead now. Panting.

What are they doing to her? I feel a rage coming on as the screams start again. I push it down and use it to feed my focus.

Do you hear what I hear, the song asks.

I hear it, I answer.

They rape the world the same way they rape each other.

They kill the world the same way they kill each other.

No list to make or check here. I am bent on violent righteousness when I kick down the makeshift plywood door propped up to keep the wind out.

Someone has turned the old lavatory into shelter but it has gone badly for them. The boy lies cold and still and bloody. The girl's screams change from pain to terror when I storm into the cluttered room and I suddenly know that things were not what they seem. I see her, in the corner, squatting in a nest of blankets. Her brown hair is long and dirty. Her brown eyes are wild and frantic. The blankets are stained with blood and I understand why. Pale and shaking, her eyes go wide as she sees me standing over the cold body of her dead mate, light spilling around me into the room.

Another contraction and she screams again. I turn, run for the medical kit beneath the driver's bench. When I return, I go in slowly with my rifle slung and my hands up showing the kit. "I can help you," I tell the girl.

Her eyes roll and she tries backing away from me but falls back into the corner. Her breath heaves out in ragged gasps.

"I'm a friend." I keep my voice low and assuring, just like in the old days. Only this time, it's not a frightened child approaching me from a long line in



"I can help you."

the mall, nervous at the presence the myth of me has become. This frightened child huddles in a frozen elementary restroom at the end of her tether, trying to shove life into a dead, cold place. "I can help you," I say again but this time I hear the doubt in my own voice. There is too much blood.

I crouch and move closer, opening the kit and finding nothing at all that I can use.

Then behind me, in the schoolyard, a clatter arises.

The eight snort and stomp and when the howling starts outside, the light winks out. The moon, hidden behind a layer of clouds, offers little visibility.

Pushing the first aid kit towards the girl, I draw my rifle again, thumb off the safety once more. I never unchambered the round. Too smart for that.

More stamping and snorting but no ringing. I took the bells off their harnesses a long time ago.

“Dashing through the snow,” a voice whispers from the edge of the schoolyard.

“O come all ye faithful,” another says.

“We wish you a merry Christmas,” sings a third.

I look over my shoulder at the girl panting in the corner. “Just stay put and keep quiet.”

Donder screams and bucks. Dasher bleats and kicks. I hear the whir of stones in slings, the distant clatter of shots gone wide.

Then, I’m outside and running at a low crouch. I’m fast for a big man, even without laying my finger to the side of my nose. I whistle and I hear the eight lifting off; I hear the labored breathing of the two who’ve been hurt. I hear the disappointed grunts

and hungry sighs. I don't wait; when one of them takes shape in the darkness, large and wide, I put a three-round burst into the center of its mass and listen to the rush of escaping air as that rush twists itself into a shriek of surprise.

Another shape forms beside it, this one bending to see to its friend. I put another burst there. I've done this before. I do the right thing.

Then I stop. I smell the burning powder on the midnight air. I listen for my eight, moving in a slow, widening circle above me.

A third takes shape near the others. I move closer, rifle raised. It moves to the left and I tap the concrete with bullets near his foot. "Hold," I tell him.

I can see him now and he might've been human once but the traces of it have left his face and eyes. He's wearing a red hat like mine, only tattered and dirty. He's dropped his sling and one of his suspenders is loose and dangling. Barefoot with wet trousers, he trembles before a vision he may have dim memory of, from a childhood spent before the world heaved its last sigh.

“Remove the hat,” I say, “and look to me.”

He pulls it off slowly. Our eyes meet and I’m pleased at the fear I see there. “Life is your gift this year,” I tell him through gritted teeth, “but it comes with a string. Tell the others what you have seen and tell them to be afraid. Every other night belongs to you but this one. I ride on this night with justice and grace.” I raise myself to full height. I fire the rifle over his head. “Now, run like a rabbit.”

He does and as he fades, the night becomes silent and holy for a heartbeat before a new cry, muffled and straining, greets its new home in a broken world.

I turn back and enter the lavatory and in that I am both too late and just in time. The girl is fading fast and in her arms she holds a sticky, bloody bundle packed into dirty cloth pulled from her makeshift nest. I see the cord that still connects them. Her eyes are wide and her nostrils flare when I draw closer but she doesn’t flinch.

She points to me. “Ho, ho, ho,” she says in a quiet voice before making the sign of the cross. She passes the squirming bundle to me and says one final word: “Charis.”

Slinging my rifle, I take the baby. I do the best I can with the tools I have, cutting the cord, closing the mother's glassy eyes. I remove my jacket. Then I clean the baby and wrap her carefully in it.

I want to stay and bury my dead but I know better. I have not prayed in years but I manage one there beside the fallen mother and father, victims of a nativity gone wrong in a world that struggles between death and birth.

Then, I whistle for my eight. We lift off into the night and I hold Charis close to me, giving the reindeer their heads to take us north and home.

As we fly, I ponder—I wonder as I wander—and I call up my list to see who on this night had wanted the gift of a child. I weep at what I find.

"It's no place for a child," I tell the eight as we soar.

"I'm far too old for this work," I say to them again.

"I am afraid," I finally admit.

But a vision unfolds to me of a tiny girl in red with elves for her friends and family, raised up with the deer and the sleigh as humanity's orphan, taught from their books and their art and the better parts of a species tremendously blessed and terribly flawed,

trained to go out into that broken world and do the right thing.

And in that moment, the light returns but it is inside me and inside of the baby in my arms, and that light threatens to swallow me whole and I beg it to because within that light is hope and promise and I recognize that tonight was the night upon which the universe—or whomever ran it—gave back to me and did so with a holy charge.

Home arises to the north and we pound sky for it. As we fly, the clouds lift and the starshine falls like a mantle of jewels over the crown of the world.

I feel the peace on earth within my chest.

Goodwill towards men lay sleeping in my arms.

“What child is this?” I ask the midnight clear.

“Yours,” it says, and weeping, we fly home.



About the Author

In addition to appearing in *Shimmer* previously, **Ken Scholes**'s quirky, speculative short fiction has been showing up over the last eight years in publications like *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Best New Fantasy 2*, *Polyphony 6* and *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future Volume XXI*.

His five book series, *The Psalms of Isaak*, is forthcoming from Tor Books with the first volume, *Lamentation*, debuting in February 2009 and the second volume, *Canticle*, following in October 2009. His first short story collection, *Long Walks, Last Flights and Other Journeys*, is forthcoming from Fairwood Press in November 2008.

Ken lives in Saint Helens, Oregon, with his amazing wonder-wife Jen West Scholes, two suspicious-looking cats and more books than you would ever want to help him move. He invites readers to look him up through his website, www.kenscholes.com.



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