

STRANGER LAKE

by Greg Stolze

It all started with the sleepwalking, which I'd never done before. I walk when I want to walk, sleep when I want to sleep, for the most part. But I'd just moved, everything was wobbly, you know how it is when you're in a new place, new people, new job, and so forth.

I was jazzed about the new digs. Stranger Lake was a what we might have called a pond back where I lived before, but rent was cheap and it had a reputation for being a nest of Satanists and weirdos. I had high hopes about the party scene despite it being two cul-de-sacs off the highway, ten minutes outside town.

It isn't really called "Stranger Lake," of course, that was just local slang because of the residents. On maps, it's listed as "Strangler Lake."

Not better, actually, but what'cha gonna do? It's Minnesota. Land of 10,000 lakes. They can't all be winners.

So I'd rented this split-level with a glass back door right to the water. There was a dock and everything, not that I had a boat—not even a canoe, but maybe time would fix that if I stuck around enough. That lower floor was a room with a bar (nice!) and I set up my TV and sofa there. There were two bedrooms upstairs, but I only needed one. Kitchen was small, but after cooking all day at the supper club, I wasn't in the habit of coming home and getting all gourmet.

I'd been there maybe two weeks before the sleepwalking started. Or maybe it began earlier than that and I just didn't wake up for it before that 4:00 AM when I walked into a door.

I don't even remember dreaming anything, just off in nobby land one minute, then BAM! Eyebrow-first into the edge of an open door, full speed. My poor melon felt like it had gotten Gallaghered. On the rebound, I fell ass first to the floor, hard. Direct hit to the ol' perineum, hurt like a long, leisurely prostate exam. I'm lucky the weather was cold enough, otherwise I might have landed on the treasure packets. I'm a skinny guy, but I don't like the odds on rupturing a testicle. Knew a guy who got kicked there once, knocked it up into some tube like an eightball in the corner pocket, swelled up in place and they had to operate to get it out. Said it was the size of an orange.

But anyhow, back to the sleepwalking. If I'd been actually awake, I think the impact might have knocked me out, but since I was out I just started moaning and bawling and I had no clue at all what had happened. Eventually my head cleared enough that I figured it out, went to the bathroom and gave a little yell when I turned on the lights. I looked like a slasher flick—you know how head wounds bleed. Once I mopped off the blood, it wasn't actually that bad. Big bruise, already going purple, but the cut was a half-inch at most. Got some butterfly bandages on it, then gauze, then ice for both my sore ends. I made sure the bedroom door was closed before I went back to sleep.

The next night was fine, but the one after that I made it all the way to the yard before I woke up stepping on a pine cone. That was the point where I decided I needed to either sort out the somnambulism, or else get some real nice pajamas. Since I sleep raw and most of my first paycheck had gone to the necessities of home decor, I decided to cure the sleepwalking. How hard could it be, right?

I consulted Dr. Google and read all kinds of crap about melatonins and cortexes and decided, instead, to get some string, silverware, and a small saucepan. Every night, I closed the door and hung the pan and spoon from the knob. A couple times I tried to get out and the clanging woke me up. Nothing to it.

#

I worked at the Black Elk Supper Club, which was pretty nice. My old friend Steff had gotten hired as manager and asked me if I wanted a chef position when her last one started taking the sauce a little too seriously. (If you don't get that joke, imagine me making the "drinky drinky" gesture.) It was small, nice, intimate, Steff yelled at the waitstaff enough to keep their young asses in line but also went to bat for them and, according to rumor, literally broke the fingers of a guy she caught stealing tips. The kitchen staff was just me for lunch, plus sous-chef Evan at dinner time, and Dishy Daisy. There were bartenders who came back to help if absolutely necessary, but all of them hated it and one of them also sucked at prep, so mostly I made do.

Dishy Daisy got her name from her job. She was miles of hard road in human form—jailhouse tattoos up and down both arms, terrible teeth, unblinking klieg-light eyes and a weird rectangular scar in the middle of her forehead.

"It's where they took out my third eye!" she told me, and I just nodded. Certainly there was a steel plate in there: She kept her headband in place with a strong "Keep On Truckin'" refrigerator magnet.

Dishy Daisy was the one who told me about Stranger Lake, though she herself no longer lived there. (The club was in a converted mansion, and she got an attic apartment in exchange for groundskeeping and scaring the shit out of any local kids who tried to break in.) "That lake's a powerful energy portal!" she told me, eyes glassy as a fresh-caught bass. "I seen it when I was just a kid, before they took out my eye. Fuckin' vortex man. Colors like flavors!"

"Oh yeah?" I said, julienning some veg.

"Rents are pretty reasonable though, if you don't mind that Satanist dude Federico."

"Hm. That could be OK. I'm not prejudiced or nothing." She told me this while I was still couching at Steff's, an arrangement Steff's girlfriend actively despised. As did I, since it seemed appropriate to sleep in pants around the lesbians.

"You just stay away from Wilma. She's a *witch*." Daisy pronounced it "wee-at^{ch}."

"What, like a Wiccan?"

"No man, like toadstools and brooms and shit! I ain't afraid of much, but I'd go back to prison before I got on Wilma's bad side."

"Whoa whoa whoa. State or Federal?"

"...well, Federal non-violent."

"Still though."

Then we talked about where we did our bids.

Satanist Federico, it turned out, was the dude who'd invested in the development, which was officially named The Darksome Woods. Nobody called it that though, for obvious reasons. He wore an all black suit with a red tie and matching pocket square when I spoke to him about renting, but other than the goatee and black nail polish, he was like any other landlord. He was super sniffy about keeping the property in good condition and at least he took it well when I declined the invitation to visit his Abyssal Temple.

"Yeah, I'm not super religious," I said.

"Oh, neither are we! We are *Satanists* not (ugh) devil worshippers," he said with a lip curl.

"Cool, good. Glad to hear it."

"The luciferian figure is, to us, a symbol of the *inner will*. We don't bend knee to some esoteric, invisible, possibly-imaginary presence like *Catholics*, or like Doug from 18-B," he said. "We study how to free ourselves of societal programming, and explore our true nature as self-sufficient creatures of passionate intellect!"

"Neat. Sure. So I'm in 18-C?"

"Indeed. Yes. Please be sure you keep the lawn at a reasonable height. Well, that's all in the brochure. Consult us before painting or major decorations that might impact curb appeal."

"Right. Yeah. So do you rent to someone named Wilma?"

"*Wilma*," he said, rolling his eyes. "Thankfully no, she owns. Whatever would you want with *her*?"

"I just heard she lives here. On Wormweed drive."

"It's Wormwood. I hope you didn't order anything for delivery to 'Wormweed'."

"Not yet, whew, thanks for the tip."

"Wilma's down in 18-G. The one with the *worst* driveway," he said, then departed, probably to freshen up his eyeliner.

Me, I strolled up Wormwood drive. The houses were all painted alike, only two designs—mine and one with a second story. Mostly the same decorative plants, except for, yup, 18-G, which was overgrown with vines and stalks and big fat droopy flowers fading around their petal rims. Federico was not kidding about her driveway either, it was all busted up with cracks, uneven and brown. I had never seen a driveway that color before.

Past the trees and whatnot, I could see that her house didn't have the same design as all the others, either. It was like a miniature gabled house from out east, only not quite. It was only one floor high but still had a widow's walk on top, which was strange to me because with all the trees around it, the only things you'd be able to see from it would be the street (a bit) and the lake in back, which you could see just as well from the ground.

I loitered a little bit then turned back to my new rental and sniffed the air. The last renters probably owned a dog, even though the lease strictly forbade it (in keeping, I'm sure, with the free-willed intellectualism espoused by Minnesota Satanism). Out back the scent was less dog and more bog, and I took a walk along the lakefront. There was a path, not paved, but beaten down dirt. No cans or bottle caps, which suggested an anemic neighborhood party life. I figured I could get around Stranger Lake in ninety minutes, stretch my legs, see what I could see. Federico and Dishy had both said the fishing was OK, and it always feels good to get agreement between people who seem really different.

I'd made it a quarter of the way around when I saw a woman in a deck chair, feet up, behind the low fence of her home's incongruous roofwalk.

"Hey," I called out.

Slowly, the feet—which were about all I could see from my angle—withdrew, and then she walked over to the edge.

"Is this private property, or is walking OK?" I called up.

"It's fine, I guess." She was probably ten years older than me, had that sort of mousy brown hair that you can pretend is blonde if you have a powerful imagination.

"I'm Roy," I said. "Moving into 18-C. Not any kinda Satanist, if you care about that."

She chuckled a little. The laugh of a woman who smokes Salems. Fleshy, and with the kind of tan that never fully wears off—a gardener tan, or road-worker, or field-hand. She was wearing a stretched-out Snoopy t-shirt and cargo shorts. The shorts were maybe a size too small—you could tell she didn't have anything in the pockets.

"Wilma," she said.

"So what's the party situation like around here?"

#

There was a pleasant span of two or three days between beating the sleepwalking and the alien hand syndrome. You ever hear of alien hand syndrome? Sounds like a prog rock cover band from the 1990s, but it's actually way less cool. What it means is, your hand starts moving on its own without your direction.

This is not a great thing to have happen in a working kitchen.

It was my left hand first and it pointed to the door. I mean, I was at the stove fricasseeing and when I expected to reach for a pan handle, nothing happened. I literally looked over and saw my arm extended and pointing across the room at the exit. I squinted at it and it picked up the pan. I did my work and thought how weird it was, but it was supper rush and I didn't have a lot of spare wavelength for it.

Then it happened again.

It was about fifty minutes later, things had died down a tiny bit and this time, it not only pointed, it snapped its fingers to get my attention. I was not aware of my arm rising up to aim, it happened entirely outside my control.

"Dishy, I'ma take my fifteen minute break!" I said, bolting for the door.

The arm immediately pointed to my car.

"Oh hell no," I said. "I can't lose this job, this is the first time in years I ain't had to report to a parole officer and I'm *not* going on the hunt for new work!"

It pointed again and I slapped it. I mean, it stung, but what else was I supposed to do?

Slowly, it turned until its tips were facing me. Then—I don't know, it happened real fast—but I grabbed it by the wrist just as it started diving to my crotch. It was *straining*, and somehow I knew that if I let go, it was going to squeeze my lemon 'til the juice ran down my leg, and not in any kind of good way.

I body-checked the edge of the door frame, which I thought might stun it? And again, it hurt. There was a little picnic table opposite the dumpster, and I bellied out on that, left hand pinned under me. It squirmed a little, then stopped. When I sat up, it slapped me.

I know, right? Slapped by my own damn hand. Then it gave that bossy snap and pointed to the car, but fuck that. I laid down on it until my hand fell asleep, and when I got up, Daisy was looking at me.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm crazy," she said. "Wait, I'm not 'sposta use that word. I guess... outta touch with reality, let's use that. But then I see other people and figure I may be just average."

"This has never happened to me before," I said.

"That's what they all say."

"What?"

"You fucked Wilma, din' cha?"

I scratched the back of my neck with my obedient hand.

"When you say it like that you make is sound ugly," I muttered.

"Why? Why did you...? I tell you she's a witch and your immediate reaction is 'Oh boy, I gotta go tear me off a piece a' THAT!'" Daisy still pronounced it "wee-at'ch."

"She seemed nice?"

"Did she?"

"Well she seemed... I don't know, available."

"Wow, Roy."

"I mean, she wasn't saying no!"

"What *did* she say?" Daisy demanded.

I scratched the back of my neck. "I... look, you know how it is..."

"I don't, actually. How about you 'splain it?"

"I went over with a six-pack a' beer... good stuff, you know, that kind you can only buy in Wisconsin? We just talked, at first."

"...at first..."

"And I was, ehn, putting on the charm... hey, don't look at me like that!"

"Like what?"

"Like you just turned over a rock and found some squirmy wormies," I said. "We talked, and one thing led to another and we *both had a nice time.*"

At that point, Evan the sous-chef stuck his head out. "You guys?" he said, and we started heading back into the kitchen.

"What did you do, *exactly*?" Daisy asked.

"I don't feel comfortable giving you the, like... the play by play," I replied.

"Did you say something to her?"

"If you must know, we talked about Ben Franklin."

"...the stove guy?"

"Oh, he has this great line about doin' it with older women," I said. "It's like, 'if you seduce a young virgin this may lead to her ruin and misery, none of which is a factor with making an old woman *happy*'."

Daisy's jaw dropped. "That's your play? That's what you say to get women in the sack? You... I mean, you can see how that's maybe *not* a compliment, right?"

"I just wanted her to feel right about what was going on!"

"I gotta side with Dishy on this one, man," Evan said.

"Hey, who asked you? I think there's some salad greens need your attention," I said.

"So you said that to her and she came across with the goods anyhow," Daisy said, shaking her head. She pulled over the bus bin of dirty dishes, rooted around until she found a half-eaten burger, tore off the bitten bits, and finished it.

"You make it sound like this was some sad, desperate... thing!" I said. "*We both had fun!*"

"Did you say anything else to her? After Franklin's wisdom?"

"I just... you know, told her I wanted to give her my gift."

"Your *gift*?"

"The gift of my body," I said, with quiet dignity, as I started searing the sides of a medium-rare steak.

Daisy actually turned away from the dishwater, eyes even wider than usual. "You told a *witch*, when you *knew* she's a witch, that you wanted to *give her your body as a gift*?"

"...when you put it like that, you make it sound stupid!"

"I don't think that has shit to do with how I *put it*. I just... I... anything else?"

"...that she could call me any time?"

"Wow Roy. Holy fuck. Just wow."

"What do you think I should do?" I asked.

"No clue, at all, whatsoever."

#

By the time I got home it was my right hand, pointing up the street at Wilma's house. Reaching across to shift into park and switch off the ignition was awkward, but I didn't even bother pulling the arm down or doing anything.

Once inside, I got out my phone and fumblingly got it working. I wasn't going to try to text her with my off-hand and, besides, some things need the personal touch. I'd considered walking down to 18-G and saying "Yo, Wilma, what the hell?" but... I chickened out. That was clearly what my remote-controlled body was trying to do, and I didn't want to just give up and go along. Scared of the wee-atch, I guess. So I compromised with a phone call, which she did not pick up. (She had a land line and an old-style blinky-light answering machine. I'd seen them during our afternoon delight—she hadn't wanted to use the bed where she slept and had just thrown an afghan on the sofa.)

"Hey Wilma, it's Roy. From a couple weeks back? I live in 18-C? Um."

I hadn't really thought through what I meant to say. "If you're bewitching me, please stop" seemed like a bad phrase to commit to a recording. Might sound a little crazy—or, fine, "out of touch with reality"—to anyone possibly more stable than Daisy. If Wilma wasn't involved, talking about sleepwalking and body control would for sure ruin any future potential there, assuming there was any in play, which there probably wasn't. After talking with Daisy, I'd thought about it and maybe I should have called her after. Usually, when a woman has kids, I prefer to let her take the next step, you know? A gal who's been burned before, you have to give her space, but maybe I took it too far.

"Sorry if you thought I ghosted you or whatever, I just didn't want to crowd you, but... um... we should talk, maybe? I feel like there's some unfinished business we should... like... f-finish? Anyhow, you have my digits, gimme a call. I'm off work tomorrow. OK. Bye."

Mortifying, but as soon as I broke the connection my right arm returned to my control.

#

WHAM!

I woke to a shock of impact up both my arms. I blinked hard and tried to look around, but my head wouldn't turn.

WHAM!

I was holding a sledgehammer, raising it and striking with it. All with no idea how I'd started or why.

"Whm," I grunted.

WHAM!

I should mention that I was dressed in my usual sleepwear, that is, air.

WHAM! Shit, I was working that hammer at a hell of a pace.

"Whmma," I muttered, then concentrated all my efforts on my lips and tongue.

WHAM!

"Wilma!" I shouted.

WHAM!

Two more strokes and she opened her door. She blinked at me and stuck a finger in the corner of her eye, like you do when you just wake up.

WHAM!

"Wilma! C'mon!"

She giggled.

"Oh my, you're just all dingle-dangle there, huh?"

"This ain't funny!"

WHAM!

"Roy, it is. It is funny. But OK, come in here."

With her words I dropped the hammer and barefooted my way into 18-G.

"Just wait there I'll find you something," she said, and there I waited.

"Wilma!" I called, as she padded off towards the parts of the house I hadn't seen. Her bedroom, her kids' room.

"Hush!" she said, coming back with a pair of Minnesota Vikings warmup pants and a sweatshirt that said "It's Wine O'Clock!"

I felt my lips seal, but I struggled.

"Wmma!"

"Arms up," she said, dressing me. "Don't wake the kids, I told them someone was coming over to work."

"Wmma!" I could almost feel the barrier giving way...

"Here, step into these. Wow, they're a little short, huh?"

"Yeah, but the ass is stretched out so *that* fits," I said, mouth free at last.

She glared at me. "I ought to shut you up again."

"C'mon, this is bullshit. You know it is. Clear and present bullshit."

She shrugged. "Why don't you go out and work that hammer some more."

Unable to stop my limbs, I did. But apparently I could still holler.

WHAM!

"Wil-maaaah!" I gave it the full Fred Flintstone.

"Jesus." She had a cup of coffee in a *King of Queens* commemorative mug.

"You just gonna work me like a zombie all day?" I demanded.

"That, or until you get that old driveway tore up."

WHAM!

"Yeah, it really does look like shit," I said.

"Hey, shut up!" She took a seat on the front stoop.

WHAM!

Apparently she hadn't meant it though, because I had no trouble speaking. "Can you throttle me back at least? I'm going to wreck myself at this rate."

WHAM!

"You told me you work out four times a week," she replied.

"Yeah, but... I'm going for tone more than bulk."

"Ugh, fine."

WHAM!

"Is it to much to ask that you get me some shoes?"

"You are the most pain in the ass zombie I ever heard of," she said, but levered herself to her feet and started towards 18-C.

"My work boots are in the front closet!" I called after her. Then I kept smashing up the brown crud she had as her driveway.

When she returned, she didn't *let* me sit, but she *had* me sit, and she put the boots on me along with a pair of socks. So she must have gone through my drawers. Which meant she'd seen my old porn. Honestly, I don't know why I bother with ancient print nudie mags. Nostalgia, I guess—I've had some of them since I was fifteen. Plus, they're good when the power gets turned off.

She also let me drink from a squeezey bottle, and we shared a breakfast load of ham and eggs.

"So am I just, like... ensorceled forever?" I asked.

"Nah, probably not. It'll wear off in a while, most likely. So you should get back to work."

I groaned, but I stood and hefted the hammer again. At least the brown junk was pretty easy to knock apart. It was already heavily cracked, after all.

"So are you really... a witch?" I asked.

WHAM!

"Ugh, it's complicated. Not like you're thinking, OK?" She looked away irritably.

"Historically, most 'witches' were just women who liked putting weird herbs up their cooters to get high," she said.

"You can get high that way?"

"Oh, super-high."

WHAM!

"So... what did I do wrong?"

"Huh?"

WHAM!

"I mean... c'mon, why are you punishing me?"

She looked blankly back at me.

"Punishing you? I just need my driveway replaced. That asshole Federico," she said, lip curling.

"I thought you owned."

WHAM!

"I do, but I still had to join the fucking homeowner association before they let me even build. Nobody likes a woman doing what she wants, I'll tell ya that for free."

WHAM!

"I'm on a fixed income now, if you must know," she said. "So I can't really afford to hire it done. Disability."

"You seemed pretty spry, if you don't mind me saying."

She rolled her eyes. "Not every disability is obvious, Roy."

WHAM!

"You want to talk about it?" I asked.

"No, never, not ever, thanks."

"Mom?" Little shapes came out of the house in PJs. I'm not good at kids, but I'd guess they were... eight and ten? Five and twelve? Pre-teens. They must have taken strongly after their dad, they looked nothing like Wilma much at all.

"Let's get you some breakfast," she said, standing to lead them inside.

WHAM!

WHAM!

When she came back out, she opened the garage door and set the two kids to work, gathering the bits of broken driveway into a wheelbarrow and then piling it up on a tarp.

"You got someone coming by to pour a new one?"

"Yeah, concrete this time."

WHAM!

"You know what?" she said. "That's enough."

#

"So that was it?" Dishy Daisy asked, rummaging among dirty dishes for cold fries. "You busted up her driveway and she let you go? You got off easy."

"How you figure? She literally enslaved my body! I'm sore as fuck, I swung a hammer like a... chain-gang... dude, I got all these blisters!"

"Yeah but you knew she was a witch." Wee-atch.

"Lemme tell you, 'witches' seem to like getting a dick down now and again, just like everyone else."

"You just better hope you were mediocre, else you'll find yourself sleepwalking over there the next time she gets a hankering for 'the gift of your body'," she said with a snicker.

"A hankering? Is that a word people actually use? Are you an 1890s gold prospector or some shit?"

"I'm just saying, don't put your pecker in a beehive and expect me to listen patiently while you complain about getting stung. You got what you wanted, she got her shit driveway busted up, everyone's a winner."

"Nah, nah, she victimized me."

"Well, only after you jerked her around."

"I was tryin' a give her space!"

"You manipulated her."

I put down a pot with a bang. "Manipulated? Look, the instant a baby realizes mom comes when he cries, communication becomes manipulative. We only say anything when we want something! We always have some idea how people are going to react, and say things to get the reactions we want! Everyone is manipulative all the time!"

"Exactly what a manipulative douchebag would say," she replied.

The waiter came through the doors, face flat. "Federico wants you to redo his pasta carbonara."

"What?" I demanded.

"He says it's not al dente enough."

"That motherfucker!"

Dishy Daisy started to snicker.

#

When Wilma answered her door, she was wearing one of those western plaid shirts with the fake pearl snaps. The one over her left boob pocket was missing. "What do you want?" she asked.

"Federico came to the club today and sent back his pasta," I said. "So all I did was wait five minutes, stick it in the microwave for sixty seconds, and give it right back."

She snickered a little.

"Also, I might have scraped some grease off the back of the oven and crumbled that over his bacon," I added. "I thought you'd want to know."

"What you have there?" she asked.

"Oh, just a six-pack."

"That good Wisconsin stuff?"

"Coronas. Sorry."

"Eh." She shrugged. "Still pretty good. Come on in."