

LANTERN

by Ali Lauderdale

The flea market unfolded like a labyrinth of lost treasures, each corner whispering secrets of the past. Tables bowed beneath the burden of corroded tools, faded paperbacks, and knickknacks long obsolete. The air was thick with the scent of aged timber, the mustiness of carpet mold, and, strangely, the sweet, nostalgic aroma of kettle corn.

Levi and Jess navigated the aisles, a cherished ritual of their weekends. She searched for antique jewelry, while he possessed no particular passion, merely a nebulous affection for the peculiar and the aged.

Then he beheld it.

The brass lantern, weathered yet sturdy, with glass panels marred by the remnants of greasy soot. Despite its lack of embellishment, the passage of time marred the metal frame. The vendor, a weathered old man with a visage reminiscent of aged leather, observed intently as Daniel lifted it from the table.

"Sharp eye," the man remarked. "That one has a story."

Jess's fingers glided over the corroded hinges. "What sort of history are we talking about?" She asked, doubtfully.

The vendor paused, uncertain. "Difficult to say. Estate sale. Came from a house where..." He let his voice fade, a casual shrug escaping him. "In any case, an intact vintage lantern like that, twenty bucks."

Levi moved without a moment's pause. There was an undeniable gravity to the lantern, a sensation that resonated deeply as it rested in his palms, as if it belonged there all along.

In the safe light of their home, Jess meticulously polished the lantern, her movements deliberate and focused. Meanwhile, Levi sat hunched over his cell phone, his eyes scanning the screen, desperately seeking to connect the vague details of the man's description to any news story that might hold the key. Nothing seemed to align perfectly.

"Are you sure it works?" Jess questioned.

Levi poured in the oil, his hands steady as he struck a match, the flame bringing the lantern to life as it kissed the new wick. A soft, inviting light enveloped the space. The flame danced erratically, its light creating peculiar shadows that elongated unnaturally.

Jess trembled, a chill creeping through her bones. "Weird light."

Levi gazed at the lantern, captivated by its glow. "It brings a sense of tranquility." Jess raised her eyebrow but decided to let him have his moment of whimsy.

Later, in the stillness of the night, Jess stirred awake to the unsettling sound of creaking floorboards echoing. The cold sheets next to her revealed that Levi had vanished from her side. She discovered him in the living room on the couch, shrouded in shadows. He had rekindled the lantern's glow while she lay in restful slumber.

"Are you okay?" she asked, nervous.

He hesitated, the silence taut between them. He sat there, transfixed by the flame. Then, without casting a glance in her direction, he murmured, "I believe someone once observed this light, just as it is now. Each night."

The lingering silence.

He looked toward her, his expression a mystery in the dim light.

"I have a nagging feeling that they remain ever vigilant, their eyes lingering in the shadows." After extinguishing the flame, he carried it to the bedroom, setting it down carefully on his nightstand.

Jess arched an eyebrow again, fascinated. "Are you kidding me?"

"What?" he asked, confused. "I find it quite appealing."

"It's grotesque. And to be honest, it's really starting to freak me out."

"It... has character."

She cast a weary glance, her silence speaking volumes, though it seemed Levi couldn't hear. That night, she turned in her sleep, emerging from a haze of indistinct, foggy dreams, and found her husband on his side, fixated on the drab lantern in the darkness, as though he anticipated it to spring to life.

A few nights later, Jess rose from her sleep, compelled by an insatiable thirst for a glass of water. As she glided back toward the bedroom, Levi emerged in the hallway, lantern in hand, its wavering glow casting an eerie shadow across his face, rendering it strange and hollow.

"Madam," he intoned, his voice rich and resonant, echoing with a hint of drama. "The night is shrouded in darkness, yet do not succumb to fear! I will guide you to safety!"

Jess erupted into laughter, the sound echoing like a sudden storm breaking the silence. "You're such an idiot," she remarked, gliding past him as she slipped into the sheets. Yet as she rolled onto her side, the warm glow remained visible on the wall, shadows elongating and morphing, moving with a deliberate slowness, reminiscent of a gentle breath.

And later, in the muted stillness, she sensed his breathing shift—deep, languid, as if he were gently drifting into a dream.

She tilted her head ever so slightly, just enough to catch a glimpse.

He remained wide awake.

Still fixated on the lantern.

Patently lingering in the gloom of time.

A week had slipped by when Jess found herself awakening in isolation.

She cast a glance at the clock—3:12 AM. The bathroom light was off. The sheets again felt cool and untouched, a lingering trace of Levi's presence fading into the darkness.

She attuned her ears to the possible whispers of the night around her. The house remained in an overwhelming stillness.

Then—a subtle creak echoed from the floorboards below.

She sat up, her pulse racing with an urgency that sent a shudder down her spine. Another sound—gentle, pulsating. Echoes of footsteps?

Jess slipped from the warmth of her bed, her bare feet hushing against the cool floor as she glided toward the ominous hallway. At the pinnacle of the staircase, her gaze fell upon it.

A gentle, dancing light, weaving its way through the dim darkness of the night.

And Levi.

He descended the stairs, the lantern brilliant, as he navigated the house, his movements deliberate and cautious, tracing a path known only to him.

She watched him glide through the living room, then the kitchen, only to retrace his steps with an air of uncertainty. A deliberate, measured path.

He had definitely walked this way before.

How many nights had he wandered through the house in this way, while she lay peacefully asleep?

"Levi?" she whispered into the stillness.

He came to a sudden halt.

The lantern swayed slowly in his grasp.

For a brief moment, he remained motionless, the flickering flame licking across his features. He offered no reply, merely turned on his heel and ascended the stairs, gliding past her in silence.

He set the lantern on the nightstand, climbed into bed, and turned his back.

Jess settled into bed, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, the silence stretching around her as she waited for his breathing to finally ease into a steady rhythm.

It never truly happened.

The whole thing quickly spiraled into something far more sinister.

He began to carry the lantern even in the daylight. Not merely confined to the house, but out into the yard. Into the dim corners of the garage. He carried it with him to the grocery store, nestled in the crook of his arm like a cherished novel he was reluctant to set aside.

"You must be kidding." Jess had remarked, her gaze fixed on the corroded object as they headed through the cereal aisle.

Levi's response was almost imperceptible. "Everything is just fine."

"It's strange."

He remained silent. It ultimately went unnoticed, the peculiar nature of it all.

Then, one morning, she caught sight of him by the door, clad in his work clothes, the lantern swaying gently from his grasp.

She chuckled, anticipating that he was going to set it down.

Yet he chose not to.

"Levi," she spoke with deliberate caution. "You're not taking that to the office?"

He stared at her, his eyes wide, as if he hadn't even noticed he'd been holding it. After a pause that seemed to stretch into eternity, he finally uttered with disdain, "Why not?"

Jess fixed her gaze upon him, a mixture of curiosity and unease swirling in her mind. "Because it's utterly insane?"

Something in his expression shifted, an undercurrent passing through his features. She had struck a nerve. He gripped the lantern with a fierce determination.

"I simply... I simply feel more at ease when I possess it," he murmured. "As if it were my duty."

"Is that so?"

He remained silent, offering no further explanation. He pivoted sharply and strode through the door, the lantern still in hand.

That night, when she inquired about his coworkers' reactions, he merely shrugged, a hint of something unspoken flickering in his eyes.

"Silence enveloped them, a heavy shroud of unspoken words."

She found herself grappling with a disquieting thought—was it more disturbing that he had actually brought it to work, or that no one seemed to bat an eye? And had nobody noticed how strange his speech was?

That night, Jess lay in bed, her gaze fixed on the ceiling, now fully accustomed to the gentle creak of the floorboards echoing in the stillness.

And the relentless, measured cadence of Daniel pacing through the house.

With a lantern gripped tightly in hand.

Anticipating.

Then the neighbors began to probe, their curiosity igniting like a spark in the dark.

Jess knelt in the front yard, her hands deep in the earth, pulling weeds with a quiet determination. Mrs. Harris from next door paused at the edge of the sidewalk, uncertainty fluttering in her eyes. The elderly woman offered a hesitant smile, her eyes betraying an aura of apprehension.

"Hey, Jess," she murmured, her eyes drifting toward the shady outline of the house. "Is everything alright with Levi?"

Jess brushed her hands against her jeans, a subtle gesture that hinted at the tension in the air.

"Yes, Mrs. Harris." She spoke a little too loudly. "Why do you ask?"

Mrs. Harris stirred uncomfortably. "Well, it's simply..." I've seen him wandering through the street after dark. On several occasions now. With that... lantern."

Jess's stomach knotted with anxiety. "What do you mean by 'wandering'?"

The woman paused a bit too long, realizing Jess didn't even know. The she spoke in a more hushed tone. "He just... takes off. Up and down the street. Excruciatingly slow. At first we wondered if he was looking for something. Or maybe he's in trouble?" She managed a faint chuckle, a sound that barely broke the tension in the air. "The gradnkids caught a glimpse of him the other night and were a bit nervous."

Jess felt a lump in her throat. "I'll talk to him. But he just likes that vintage lantern a lot."

That night, sleep eluded her.

At 2:47 AM, the sound of the front door clicking shut pierced the stillness of the night. She quietly slipped from the warmth of her bed and approached the window to watch.

Levi strolled along the dimly lit street, the lantern swaying delicately in his grasp, casting pulsating gloom that glimmered around him. His steps were measured, purposeful, tracing another unseen path.

A porch light blinked to life across the street. Jess imagined she could see her neighbor's eyes, a silent observer cloaked in the veil of night.

Levi seemed oblivious.

He continued his relentless stride.

Jess felt an unsettling, visceral conviction that if she stepped outside and called for him, he would not respond.

She was lost in the silence, her voice would be swallowed by the void.

She remained silent.

She stood there, unnoticed, as he melted into the blackness of the road, the lantern's light twirling erratically in the encroaching darkness.

For the first time, an ember of doubt burned in her mind—would he come back?

Then, on a night like no other, he did fail to come back home.

She discovered him just before dawn, poised at the boundary of the woods that marked the end of their street. The lantern blazed with an odd tenacity, its wick loaded with an unnatural vitality. The flame jumped in a peculiar way within the glass, creating a glow that mirrored a slow, quivering breath in the stillness of the night.

"Levi."

He turned to confront her.

She inhaled sharply.

He was ghostly pale. *Excessively* pale. Desperation cloaked his deep-set eyes, as if he had gone without sleep for a lifetime. His hair had grown sparse. His cheeks were more hollow. His lips were parched and fissured.

"Levi, what is happening to you?" She murmured, her voice laced with concern.

He blinked, a wave of confusion washing over him.

"What's that?" His voice echoed, a mere mumble from the recesses.

She reached her hand and took his wrist with a firm grip. His skin was chilled.

"Please, come inside," she urged, her voice trembling and urgent.

His fingers gripped the lantern with intensity. "I must continue my journey."

"No, you absolutely don't—"

"I truly do," he insisted. His voice had taken on a newfound strength. More distinct. "I must."

Jess felt a constriction in her chest. "Why?"

For the first time, a flame ignited within him—an urge to respond, yet the words eluded him, humming just beyond the reach of his lips. He adjusted the lantern with a subtle twist, allowing the soft illumination to sweep across her features.

And then *she* beheld it.

Within the crystal confines, past the flickering light—an image stirred.

Not her own, and not Levi's. Not even the trees around them.

Another thing entirely.

It shifted in tandem with Levi's movements, yet the form was unsettlingly askew. Its face bore an unsettling sharpness, an eerie and unnatural stretch. Its eyes were shadowy abysses. Its mouth stretched gross and wide, lips barely parting, groaning quietly.

She flinched back. "Levi, put it down!"

His brow furrowed in anger. "What?"

"The lantern! Put it down!"

He paused, uncertain. His grip wavered, a fleeting moment of doubt creeping in.

For an instant, she believed he might truly release his grip.

Then the light erupted, blinding and intense.

Levi inhaled sharply, as if an invisible hand had tightened its grip around his throat. His back arched, fingers gripping the handle with so much force that his knuckles turned a ghostly white. The flame blazed and swirled within the confines of the glass, a chaotic ballet of brightness and darkness.

The whispering increased, echoing through the night.

And in an instant, his expression switched.

The uncertainty dissipated. His features softened, and a sense of comfort gushed over him.

As he gazed at her once more, a serene stillness filled his eyes. Nearly tranquil.

"Return home, Jessica," he murmured gently.

"Levi—"

A smile crept across his face. A genuine smile, the first in a long time.

"It's all right," he whispered softly. "I see it clearly now."

Then, before she could stop him, he purposefully strode into the foliage, the lantern with pulsating illumination at his side.

Jess pursued him in a fervor. "Levi, stop!"

Yet as she stumbled through the overgrowth, the flame danced—and he vanished.

The lantern's light popped and then was gone, consumed by the encroaching darkness of the trees.

She cried out for him, her voice piercing through the silence of the night.

Silence lingered in the air, heavy and unyielding.

Only an oppressive stillness lingered.

Jess wondered if she was imagining the soft glow of firelight in the trees, that drifted deeper into the distance.

Continuing onward.

Endlessly wandering.