



Night Sentry
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The Gun Nerd

In Nebraska, it gets cold in January. And the wind tries to rip you in half. On that particular night, it wasn't a steady gale like usual, but gusty. Just when you thought it had backed off, it blasted you. This led to more frigid air finding its way into coats, under hats, up nostrils.

And Mikey had another two hours on watch. He *hated* being up in the middle of the night, and the cold was just the cherry on top of the whole crap sundae.

Watch. Ha. It wasn't like Mikey could see that much, anyway. It was too bad they couldn't get a hold of some night vision goggles. Like he'd seen on Discovery Channel, back when there was a Discovery Channel. That show about futuristic weapons, with that ex-seal. What he wouldn't give for that kind of hardware. Of course, if they *did* happen to get a hold of some night vision goggles, it's not like they'd have been able to have an endless supply of batteries for them.

Listen to yourself, Mikey grumbled in his head, as if paying attention to thoughts qualified as 'listening'. *You're just a regular military nut, aren't you?*

It was true, though. Most teenagers scraped together their minimum-wage earnings to get a junky car. Mikey, as soon as he turned eighteen, was going to drive into Omaha and buy himself an M-14. Not one of those easily-jamming plastic assault rifles that replaced it, but a real, wood-and-iron, thirty-caliber weapon.

Nobody was driving into Omaha anymore. His dad had joined a few of the other men around town in trying to go there for some critical supplies, just after Mikey's seventeenth birthday. They never came back. What little ham-radio scraps of information they heard about the world outside their hastily-erected town walls contained no news about them, and nobody but Mikey had the guts to go looking. Not even jock-hero Carey Kolpack, even though *his* pop, divorced from his mom, had lived in Omaha.

Mikey found himself staring at the air three feet in front of his face again, like he did when he was a little kid and his mind would allow itself to get drawn into thinking about something. He took in a few deep lungfuls of frosty air, which cleared his head, and tried to refocus on looking for anything unusual, or at least a deer or coyote to take a hunter's shot at.

Instead of night-vision, a watchman had to rely on the perimeter lighting. It was an unfortunate necessity, drawing valuable power away

from the people inside the wall, but everyone agreed that a modicum of peace of mind was more conducive to sleep than additional heat.

At least he'd only drawn wall duty tonight. This meant he had room to walk around, and he wasn't a hundred feet up in the air like Riggs and Cooney, the poor bastards that had drawn sniper duty. He looked to his right, at the looming cylindrical shape of the town's grain elevator. He made out some movement up there, but it was impossible to tell who it was. There was no point in lighting the top of the elevator, after all.

A fresh blast of arctic air jolted Mikey, who hadn't even noticed the last gust slack off. He'd been pacing, and had to stumble a bit before getting his feet back under him. He turned his body to the north, as if whirling on an inconsiderate stranger that had bumped into him on the sidewalk.

After letting a fresh curse word be carried away on the wind, he turned back south toward the outside.

A man was standing out there.

Mikey's weapon, not an M-14, but a Winchester .243 deer rifle that was shared by the sentries, was out from behind his shoulder in a heartbeat. He fumbled around with the glove on his trigger hand. Crap! If the stranger had a rifle of his own, Mikey could have taken a round to the back of his head, leaving an inattentive, head-shot corpse. They wouldn't be able to let Janey and little Cass see him; they'd have to mourn an internal picture in their heads.

Damn, but he was so easily distracted!

"Hey down there!"

The stranger, his shape indistinct under a dark, flowing top garment, raised two hands in front of him. They were covered by fur mittens of some sort, so it was unlikely he'd be shooting anytime soon.

"I'm not armed," he shouted back. "I'd like to come in." It was odd, the man's voice. It was raspy, wounded, the product of vocal cords that shouldn't have been able to heard over the howling wind. Worse yet, there was something familiar in the voice, too, something Mikey felt rather than heard.

Mikey was supposed to say no to that request. Nobody gets close enough to even touch the wall after dark.

"I'm supposed to say no. Sorry, buddy, but we get a tad paranoid in here. Especially when people show up in the middle of the night."

The man simply shrugged. "I can wait."

Of all the responses that he could have given, that was the one that Mikey expected the least. Usually folks would beg, or threaten, or swear vengeance.

Taken off guard, all Mikey could shout back was: "Okay, then."

At this point, the stranger should have walked off into the shadows, toward the trees to the south along the riverbank, to take advantage of the crude shelter they provided. Instead, he remained standing. Mikey thought about shouting to the guy. Something about how if he hoped that him collapsing would stir a sympathetic reaction and get some of the defenders to run out, pick him up, and take him inside, he would be sadly disappointed. But how do you say something with that many words when you're shouting at the top of your lungs?

He couldn't make a face out from under the garment that covered the stranger from head to toe. Even when a fresh assault of frigid wind pinned the folds of cloth back, his face wasn't revealed. Mikey had a fleeting, perverse thought that if he just put a round through the man's head, he wouldn't have to keep feeling the stranger's eyes boring at him through the winter air.

"You, ah, just gonna stand out there?"

There was no shifting before the stranger responded, nothing to indicate he'd been looking anywhere other than right at Mikey.

"You told me I couldn't come in."

"Yeah. Well... don't just stand out there. Go back into the trees or something. Catch a nap."

"I don't need a nap. Are you going to shoot me if I don't go away?"

"Yeah!" As soon as Mikey yelled the word, he knew it didn't sound like he meant it.

And, because Mikey *didn't* shoot him, he continued to stand there.

Captain of the Football Team

It was a brutal two hours, but at least the stranger didn't attempt to come any closer to the wall in an attempt to force Mikey's hand. He had no problem defending himself, but he wasn't sure he'd actually be able to shoot if the guy calmly, with no show of belligerence, walked up to him. The wall was twelve feet high, fashioned from precast concrete slabs that had been pulled up from one of the town's streets, so it wasn't like anybody could jump it or climb it, but Mikey had a creepy feeling the guy would be capable of doing something he didn't like very much if he wanted to.

He was relieved by Carey Kolpack, the jock who a decade before had bullied Mikey around in junior high, who still made him feel off balance whenever they talked. Crap, couldn't it have been someone he liked, that he could confide in?

Instead, he just brusquely told Carey: "I've got an idiot that's been standing out there for the last couple of hours." He tried just to walk past him to the nearest set of stairs, but Carey grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Whaddya mean, somebody's standing out there? You didn't call for backup?"

Mikey wanted to explain that the standard signal of two quick shots was an unnecessary waste of ammo for a lone, unarmed stranger. He kept quiet, knowing if he got into it he'd start whining like a seventh grader, the way he always seemed to around Carey. The guy was still revered by many in town; after all, he'd scored three touchdowns against West Point the year they were rated in the *Omaha World-Herald*. As a result, Mikey felt like nobody would take his side in such a challenge.

"Well?"

All Mikey managed to say was: "He's just standing there. He hasn't tried anything the whole time."

Carey let a curse word out as he looked over the parapet, into the muddy glow of the perimeter lights. He seemed to think of some sort of response that would humiliate Mikey in retribution for the breach of protocol, but must have been too sleepy to come up with anything.

"Yeah, well, tell Craig about it before you go to bed."

Well, duh, Mikey wanted to respond. He was going to tell Craig Marks, who was serving as the Watch Chief, as soon as he got off the wall, but after hearing Carey suggest it, he suddenly didn't want to.

"Yeah," he managed to grunt out, and walked along the parapet.

Before he descended the stairs that took him down to street level, he stole one more glance over his shoulder, at the form of the man who was still out there.

The guy had turned a little, to make sure he was still facing Mikey.

With a shudder that didn't come from the cold wind, he descended the stairs and set off toward the Sheriff's station. He was almost certain the stranger continued to move to face Mikey, like a sunflower tracking the sun.

The War Hero

Craig Marks rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, but Mikey liked him. He was abrasive, nearing his fifties, and all stubble on his head and face, as if his hair and beard did their best to match his personality.

Despite the unkempt appearance and irascible personality, Craig was a leader. When the shit hit the fan, if you weren't looking to Craig, you were an idiot. The problem was, when the shit *wasn't* hitting the fan, and it generally wasn't, it was hard to miss the fact that he didn't like people very much.

That's why, even though he was the best person to lead up the response to any security concerns, he took the night shift. It meant there were less folks to deal with.

"What's wrong?"

This was the greeting Craig gave Mikey as he walked through the door of the Sheriff's station. It was about as congenial as the grizzled man would get; he despised the exchange of pleasantries, and if he responded to the standard greeting of 'how are you?' at all, it was with: "Do you really want to know, or do you want me to give you the standard bullshit 'fine'?"

Mikey had spent enough time around Craig to just answer him. "Something weird out there on the perimeter. A guy just walked up out of the dark and asked to come in."

"And you said 'no', right?"

"I'm supposed to say 'no'. So I said 'no'."

"So did he piss off?"

Craig had asked this casually as his head rotated back to the tattered old book he'd been reading. When Mikey responded, his head came back up. "No, he's just standing out there. Been standing there for two hours, at least."

"You left Carey out there by himself? You should have signaled."

"He's *fine*. It's not like the guy was doing anything."

"Yeah, but how often does someone just walk up to the wall in the middle of the night? I think it's been at least a month since the last group of strangers showed up, and that was in the middle of the day. This guy's by himself. *At night*. It smells funny."

"You want to go check it out?"

Craig shot him a look that said, *no shit, Sherlock*, as he thrust an arm into the sleeve of his coat. "You come too. It's probably nothing. But if it's something, I might need you to run up the wall and let everyone know

what's going on. Especially Riggs and Cooney, 'cuz I sure as hell ain't gonna be the one climbing up that ladder."

Uninvited Guest

The muscles of Mikey's neck groaned, and his fingers and toes protested, as he pushed the door open back into the frigid night. Even though the wall was only a couple of blocks from the station, the walk back there felt like a death march. The wind was mercifully at his back, but Mikey knew after Craig and Carey stared at the idiot interloper for a few minutes, he'd have to walk to bed facing fully into it.

The glow of the perimeter lights reached above the wall, and poked thin ribbons of light through where the slabs joined. Mikey looked away from it, away from an inexplicable shard of despair the sight shoved into his gut, and cast his eyes down to the footsteps he'd just made on the walk up. They'd already been mostly erased by the wind and fresh snow.

A movement from his periphery caused him to look up, in time to see Craig running past him toward the wall. Without questioning, Mikey ran after him.

His brain was too sleep-deprived to ask '*why?*', but he sensed something wasn't quite right.

After drawing to within half a block of the wall, Mikey realized he should have been seeing the silhouette of Carey's head and shoulders above the top of the parapet.

Craig bounded up the stairs, and quickly dropped to all fours. He scabbled along the parapet, a sight that should have been comical but was anything but. As Mikey's protesting, nearly seized legs pushed him up the stairs that he had descended just a few minutes before, he could see an odd shape on the walkway boards.

Mikey had almost forgotten why he had come back out in the first place. He was *so* cold and tired. Something tugged at his memory, though, enough to make him turn to his left and look over the wall.

The stranger was still out there, facing right at him.

"Get *down!*" Craig barked at Mikey. Clumsily, he complied, his knees barely cushioned by the snow as he buckled himself onto the walkway. Craig was still bent over the Carey-sized shape, whose edges seemed to flutter a little in the wind.

Mikey heard a curse word from the older man, and it finally dawned on him what the bundle was. He stole a glance over the top of the wall, just barely, as if discovering what had just happened would cause the stranger to transform.

Craig didn't give Mikey any more instructions. He whipped his hunting rifle, a lever-action .30 caliber, over the wall and aimed for a second before squeezing off a round.

From his vantage point, Mikey swore he saw the snow kick up *directly* behind the stranger. Craig had hit the odd, flowing overgarment dead center.

He kept standing, as if he hadn't even heard the gunshot.

Craig let loose a rapid string of profanities, far more meaningful as a whole than the individual words were, as he twisted the rifle and worked the action. This time, he rested his hand on the wall, let all the breath escape his lungs, and squeezed.

Another flare of snow kicked up behind the shape, and this time Mikey swore he saw a scrap of cloth and something solid and black exit the back of the stranger. But it remained standing.

Craig was working in another cartridge, and no words were escaping his mouth. His eyes were wide, nearly bugging out, but still concentrating on the task at hand. Mikey now got a full revelation of the man who had come back from the Middle East refusing to talk about his time there, but followed by rumors of heroism straight out of a Homeric tale.

As he took aim, the man out in the snow raised an arm.

Mikey's gaze was torn from the stranger by a flutter of movement down the parapet. The Carey-sized lump on the walkway had doubled in size. Craig's rifle leaned against the parapet, as if he had gingerly set it there before collapsing.

Now the man was approaching.

Mikey began to fumble for his rifle, but not for too long. If Craig had actually missed twice, it was the first two consecutive failures he'd ever had. Surely Riggs and Cooney would have heard the shots, and placed a few of their own by now, if they were alive up in their perch.

No, guns were no good.

"What do you want from us?" It was all Mikey could think to say.

"I just wanted to come see you and your mom, Mikey."

The apparition had gotten closer now, and the request sounded like he had whispered it in Mikey's ear. Even though it was a withered, dessicated version of itself, he recognized it.

"You can come out with me. I'll take you to Omaha, and you can get that M-14 you always wanted."

Mikey turned and sat on the walkway, resting his back against the parapet. He had a feeling that it didn't matter if he opened the gate or not.

About the Author:

Greg M. Hall has many stories online and in print. For links to his other work and his novel, *Traffic Control*, visit his website at www.gregmhall.com, or follow him on Facebook by liking Fiction by Greg M. Hall.

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