

Hold Your Breath

By C. Jade Wyton

A very young Robin Stoneclaw gets sick of waiting for her father to come home, and sneaks out during the night.

Contains very mild horror themes.

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Robin had been waiting impatiently for her father to come home *all day* and, as much as she liked her cousin Jory, his bedtime stories just weren't the same.

She wanted to hear a *real* story about a *real* adventure, before bed! Not a *fake* story from a book!

She knew that Jory had done his best but, as she lay in bed and looked at the thick cloth curtains (that had to stay closed at night, for some reason), Robin just couldn't settle down enough to sleep.

Her dad was supposed to be home *before* sunset! Not *after*!

He must have been held up at the sheriff's office with her Uncle Bertram, Jory had said. And with how late it was, whatever had kept them all day might end up keeping them all night; he'd said they might not be home until *morning*! Which was *completely unacceptable*! Because she was only three, and three year olds needed their dads (that's what Grandma Rueben always said, anyway)!

The sound of Jory fumbling with some sort of pan in the kitchen was heard, and Robin frowned, giving a loud huff as she threw her blanket aside.

*That did it! Enough was enough, she was going to go and find her dad and bring him home herself!*

Rising from the bed and tugging her lungs onto her back, Robin pricked up her ears to listen out for Jory.

The boy was cursing— Though, he was using stupid silly swears like “gosh darn it” and “fiddlesticks” and “horse apples,” instead of real ones like “shit” or “fuck” or “dickhead” like her other cousins would have used.

That was something she liked about Jory— He was softer and gentler than the rest of her family. He never broke anything. At least not on purpose. And when he *did* he was actually sorry about it and would apologise.

Slowly, confident that Jory was fully distracted by whatever he spilt, Robin turned and broke her uncle Bertram's biggest nighttime rule; she pulled apart the curtain and unlatched the window.

She looked out into the dark road, free from street lights or other houses, before carefully lifting herself out the window and swinging herself to the ground.

She was *just* tall enough to reach up and close the window again; which she did before looking back around the empty property.

*Which way led to town?* She could barely remember. Left? Right? She was pretty sure it was right. But then, which hand was her right hand, again?

She took a guess, confidently pulling on the straps of her lungs to adjust them comfortably so she could walk in what she was pretty sure was the right direction.

She walked and walked, swivelling her ears around as she did so she could listen to the night bugs.

It was very quiet, tonight. So much quieter than back in Copperpit. Instead of clanging and clattering from the night-time workers moving heavy loads and cleaning the mining equipment, there was the peace of proper rest.

It was nice. Though it made it much harder to figure out if she was heading in the right direction—

Robin's foot squelched into a puddle of mud; sinking all the way down to her ankle as she lost her balance and almost fell.

She yanked her foot up and out of the hole and gave a frustrated groan as she shook it off.

*Gross! Why was the mud here so stinky?!*

She liked the mud better in Copperpit; the upturned dirt of the active mines was much cleaner than the murky swamp ground.

*Swamp?*

Oh.

Robin glanced around.

Oh, she was in the swamp.... She must have take a wrong turn, somewhere.

That was okay, though... she'd just turn around and head back to the house.

*Which way had she come from?*

Robin had been so distracted by the muddy hole that she'd forgotten which way she'd been walking.

She glanced around, trying to figure out where she'd come from, and realised... it was quiet.

Even quieter than usual in Thistlebond.

The night-animals had suddenly cut off and gone quiet. There were no crickets, or cicadas, or owls. Nothing was making noise anymore. Nothing but her lungs and their low constant hum as she breathed.

It was so eerie and strange it made Robin's fur stand on end and her tail puff out.

Then she saw it. Just to her left (or was that her right?) and about two dining table's lengths away from her a large shadow loomed in the trees; formless and round like a cat sitting with its legs and tail tucked under its body.

The twinkle of something's eye reflected in the dim moonlight that shone down through the clouds.... And then a second eye appeared as it turned; large ears flicking up in Robin's direction as her machine gave a pressurised *hiss*.

Robin felt paralysed as the animal (was it an animal? She'd never seen an animal so huge and dark!) slowly turned and groaned and rose up to stand on thick, clawed feet. It towered tall in the trees, even taller than Robin's father did, and swayed as if it couldn't quite find its balance. It was the biggest thing she'd ever seen— Bigger than the machines in Copperpit that moved giant rocks and wooden beams. And as it pressed a tree down and *snapped!* it under a claw as it shifted, Robin was sure it was even bigger than a house.

It had almost turned enough to see her when she was swept to the side; a hand clamping down tight over her snout as she was pulled behind a tree and held close.

She almost screamed but realised at the last second it was Jory who had

grabbed her. She could feel him trembling as he gripped her tightly and swallowed audibly.

*Stomp....*

*Stomp....*

The creature's heavy footsteps slowly approached as Robin's lungs gave another hiss and released pressure, and Robin felt Jory's hand move from her mouth to her side.

*'Take a deep breath,'* Jory whispered. *'An' dun't let it out.'*

Robin did as she was told.

Then there was a *click!* as Jory turned off her lungs. And the silence that followed hung in the trees like webs in a corner.

*Stomp....*

*Stomp....*

*STOMP...!*

*STOMP...!*

*Stomp....*

*Stomp....*

The creature passed them by.

*'Keep holdin' ya breath,'* Jory told her as the creature's footsteps faded into the distance. *'Just a little longer.'*

It hurt to do; but Robin didn't dare disobey.

She held her breath. She held her breath for what felt like a whole *hour* until—  
*Click!*

Jory turned her lungs back on and she could breathe again.

She took a gasping breath of air and felt tears escape her eyes as her next breath came out as a sob and she was spun around to face her cousin.

*'What were ya doing?'* Jory asked, taking her by the shoulders and giving her a short shake. *'Ya could'a got lost or got killed!'*

*'I just wanted to find Dad!'* Robin squeaked; feeling her voice break. *'I couldn't sleep without him! I just wanted Dad! I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!'*

Jory pulled her close, giving her a very tight hug, before he wiped her eyes and took her hand. *'C'mon. We gotta get home.'*

Robin was quiet as Jory led her home. But as they breached the treeline, she felt her ears press down.

*'I'm sorry,'* she said again.

*'S'alright,'* Jory let out a deep breath, finally relaxing as they made it back onto the Bluebell property.

*'Am I gonna get in trouble?'* Robin asked.

Jory took a deep, deep breath, and then shook his head. *'Look, I wun't tell ya pap that ya snuck out,'* he promised. *'But in return ya cun't tell mine that I weren't watching you properly. Dun let anybody know 'bout t'night, yeah? If they ask, we was playing board games an' reading books. Right?'*

*'Alright,'* Robin agreed.

*'Right. An' from now on, y'listen t'me an' trust me t'have a good reason when I tell ya t'do things, right?'* Jory told her. *'Even if ya don't understand th' rules or they seem silly t'ya. There's a reason for 'em. I'd never teach ya a rule that dun't have a reason for being a rule, right?'*

‘Right.’

‘Right,’ Jory slowed, now, as they made it to the front porch. He helped Robin up the steps to the house and then locked the door tight behind them. ‘C’mon. I knew you weren’t sleepin’ so I made ya something t’eat. Might be a bit cold now, but should still taste a’right. If y’hungry.’

‘I am,’ Robin confirmed.

Jory gave her a nod and finally let go of her hand, though she didn’t let go of his and clung onto him tightly. His eyes softened in sympathy as she edged closer to him, and he pet her head with his free hand.

‘Y’right?’ he asked.

‘Can I sleep in your room with you?’ she asked. ‘Please?’

‘Yeah, course.’

—END—

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