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## Night Song

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# NIGHT SONG

My name is Kent and this begins in the blackness all my days do and I'll speak it in present tense. Born blind, no sense of gradations of light, even, only blank black space--if I could identify what space means. Crumbs from breakfast lie under my fingers like scrambled braille--a right-hand-only reader--and my impulse is to brush them to the floor for Boris, my eyes, as the agency that supplies him says, the third dog I've called mine. I sense him to the left, from the heated personality a body exudes, curled in his napping pose. If I stand, he'll be on his feet, claws tapping, and nudge my right leg, hand harness at the ready.

Dogs don't like change, the agency says, especially in diet and feeding hours, and giving Boris leftovers or brushing crumbs to the floor for the pleasure of listening to his lapping maybe does affect his nature, because he's developing a half-human streak that I register as empathy, if that's the right word-- a *feeling*. He's not usually erratic but not as attentive as other dogs I've loved as I've loved no human being--before they had to be retired, as the agency says, and I don't want to know. I've learned that no two dogs are the same, in scent or personality, and I don't like canes.

Boris, they've said, is fifth generation of the best guide-dog family the agency has, and may be used for breeding, and here my mind leaps to my birth, and the matter I've been examining with audio books and the Internet--oxygen at birth. I believe I received an overdose in the incubator (I was five pounds) from a nurse cranking it too high. This was before research settled its potential to blind--I'm old enough to fit the era--and *that* was it, was how the hospital pulled one over on my parents, it wasn't congenital, as the hospital said, it wasn't their fault.

Born that way, my parents said, and sent me to a school for the blind at the age of five, then they divorced, and though one or the other visited when they felt guilty, as I took it, my mother did fill out a disability form for me somewhere down the line. But when I got my first dog they disappeared into the blank black space that is my consciousness of the world beyond.

So now I curve my hands around the saucer, which is where it should be, set the cup in it on the table, a placement set in my nerves to keep from breaking

it, brush the crumbs into the saucer, and stand and turn to the sink, an easy reach in another agency's provision, my two rooms, and set the saucer in the sink's ringing tinny bottom. Boris sniffs the back of my knee--odd, or maybe I wiped butter there--before he nudges my leg.

"You're right," I say, "now we take our morning walk."

I grab hold of the hand grip and he's so restless I hear claws in a slippery clacking on the slick floor from his tug. I've followed the floor's hairline cracks when I'm on my hands and knees, cleaning, and these form squares--tiles, my speaking computer said. A gravelly voice from the agency described every area of my apartment on our first walk-through but my memory for objects isn't as good as it is for those once sighted, as I learned at the school. I'm proficient only with circles and squares.

At the door Boris pants, anxious. He knows I have to turn the knob--its alien K I heard on my speller at odds with the round roller I grip. We step into the scent of California heat, made up of irregular growth underfoot if I misstep and an aroma I tag as *magnolia*, a plant name I heard from a book. I prefer the scratchy tension of concrete, no surprise underfoot, which is the path Boris takes to our first stop, a crossing light. The city installed a beeper last year, so my knowledge not to step into the street is added to the sight of Boris. I can count to two hundred from the time the beeps begin, and they've only started, so I ease my hold on his harness.

Voices seldom pass at this hour but I hear a woman's close, then the warmth of her passage behind, along with a scent that's hers and another tied to a pattering below, and with a bolt Boris is gone. This can't be. I don't know which way to turn.

"No, you brute," the woman's voice says. "Get back! *Off!*"

I turn that direction and say, "Is that my dog you--"

"Off, off! My God, Millie, you act like-- Yes, that's your dog, and you are responsible! That mongrel is humping my purebred, registered Akita!"

"Push him away! He won't bite."

"I tried, but he's too damn big and by now I bet they're hung up."

"Hung up?"

"Don't you know dogs, don't you own one?"

I step closer, unstable without my grip on the handle Boris always has ready, and say, "I thought I did. This has never happened."

"My God, there it is, hung up! She'll probably have sixteen of the ugly bastards, unless I get her a D and C, if you can with a dog."

"Hung up?"

"What are you, stone blind?"

"Yes I am."

"Your eyes look fine to me."

"Others say that."

"Hung up is-- A dog penis has these balls on the sides, not testicles, and once he gets in and starts going away at it, those swell so big he can't pull out and they turn ass to ass, like they are now, hangdog damn fools while he keeps shooting her up till those shrink. This is awful! I'm about to bawl! She's not only a registered beauty, she's a virgin!"

"I am."

"Oh, come off it! A fellow like you, probably thirty? Really!"

"Thirty-two. I do push-ups."

"Is that supposed to carry one of those television comedians' naughty meanings--push-ups?"

"It's my exercise."

"If you're so blind as you say, I don't know how you stare right at me."

"I can locate people exactly, they say."

"So how do I look?"

"I never had sight, so I'm not sure how women look."

"You poor sad creature."

"I can assure it's true."

"You're so formal it's creepy. I bet you don't see many people-- O, goodness me, pardon mixifated me! I always get what I want to say screwed around when I'm in a state like this. I mean I bet you don't keep company with too many normal, you know, folks that aren't blind."

"I have few conversations."

"So you're out of your element--not really formal--naïve!"

"I believe that's correct."

"How absolute your answers are!"

"*Hamlet.*"

"You know Shakespeare? I love Shakespeare!"

"I listen on my computer. In every scene he has one speech that makes my brain send up sparks. I went to a play once."

"Shakespeare?"

"*American Buffalo.*"

"That's that nasty guy with all his f-ings, isn't it?"

"The word is everywhere."

"I bet you never had a drink, I mean of alcohol, either."

"Once, but I have to stay exact to keep Boris in control. That's my dog. I've always had him in control."

"At least he's done."

He leans into my leg, hand grip handy. "Shame," I say. "*Shame!*"--and feel his head lower, his personality melt and smolder.

"He's doing what comes natural to dogs, if you've lost control. Whoo! This has me so cranked I'm calling it quits for the day!"

"It's barely begun."

"Well, it's over, till I see my vet. Why don't you come and tell her--on the phone I mean--about your dog. I'm parked down the street. I hoped Millie and I could have a walk in a quiet neighborhood and look what it's wrought! I'll have some wine to settle my nerves and talk to my vet about your responsibility in this. I'll drive you back."

Now it's true night, a moist spring chill over my endless dark, and Boris and I are here after a wearying day of talk and the rest. I'm at my audio player that records and what I want to say is, O, the glory of the gift of touch, and I am a singer in the night, a dark blank note not dead, a master of pleasure blowing free, my seeing eye my head.

## About Larry Woiwode

Larry Woiwode's stories have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *GQ*, *Harpers*, *Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, and a variety of publications, including two dozen stories in *The New Yorker*, and are included in four volumes of *The Best American Short Stories*. His memoir *What I Think I Did* was his sixth book named "notable book of the year" by the *New York Times Book Review*; and the follow-up memoir, *A Step From Death*, a *NYTBR* "Editor's Choice." He is a Guggenheim Fellow, a Lannan Literary Fellow, a U. S. State Department Traveling Artist, and recipient of the Medal of Merit from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, "for distinction in the art of the short story." He has received the Aga Khan Prize, the John Dos Passos Prize, The Theodore Roosevelt Rough Rider Award; and in 1995, by a joint resolution of the state house and senate, and confirmation by the governor, he was named Poet Laureate of North Dakota.