Midnight Snack

by Jeanne Dickey

Apples of shame ripened my habitually pale cheeks when my English teacher, Mrs. Oakes, slammed the paper marked “C” on my desk.

“No,” I confessed, “I did not finish Jane Eyre.”

“It shows,” she said.

I sank into my socks. If she had asked me *why* I didn't finish Jane Eyre, I would have told her. Instead of running away with Edward Rochester, her master and true love, Jane ran away from him, and wandered around a strange, lonely town for a few weeks. So what if the lunatic who lived in his attic was actually his deranged wife? If Jane had only agreed to be Rochester's mistress and live by his side in a French villa, she'd have been happy. And if that wasn't bad enough, after spending a night in the forest, wet and starved, Jane approached the door of a cottage where a little girl was about to throw some porridge into a pig trough. She held out her cupped hands and begged. The girl filled them with cold porridge, and Jane ate it. I stopped there because I couldn't bear that she'd given up the chance to live with Rochester, in luxury, in the first place; and now she was sort of like an animal, only infinitely worse.

On my test, I wrote that Jane, humiliated after the porridge incident, went back to the woods, threw herself on the forest floor, and dissolved quietly into the mosses, ferns, and wildflowers that surrounded her. Being seventeen and knowing very little about being, I was one year younger than Jane, who knew everything.

I told Mrs. Oakes, “That was the end in the book I had. Some of the pages must have been missing.”

“I see,” she said, and walked away. Mrs. Oakes had always liked me; now she would think I was weird.

That night, my mother and I sat sewing in our den. My mother was silent until the stroke of midnight, when she said, “Mrs. Oakes called me today. She told me that you weren't happy.” I looked past her shoulders, through the glass porch door, into the woods beyond

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/jeanne-dickey/midnight-snack»*
Copyright © 2009 Jeanne Dickey. All rights reserved.

our yard. Something ruffled through the leaves, a small animal, perhaps.

I was about to answer when that something emerged from the woods. It was not an animal, after all, but a woman dressed all in brown. She approached our porch windows. I shuddered and turned away. But her coming was inevitable. When I turned back, she was staring in our window.

How long had she been there? Gentle and civilized as the woman appeared, wrapped in a cloak, there was yet something of the beast about her. Her nose, large for her face, quivered like a deer's. I knew instantly who she was.

“Mom,” I said, “it's Jane Eyre at our door. Look what's happened to her!”

My mother turned and gazed at her in silent recognition. “Well, we'll have to give her something, won't we?” she said, and left for the kitchen.

What did we have to give Jane Eyre? It made no sense. But then, of course it did. Whether she knew it or not, Jane Eyre was always hungry. I walked timorously to the door. The porch windows had recently been cleaned, and I could read Jane's big, bulging eyes. They said, “On a cold summer night, a tree just loses its blossoms.” My mother returned, and she placed not porridge, but sandwiches and coffee on our TV table. She slid the porch door open.

Bigger and taller than my mother, and wider, Jane nevertheless sidled gracefully over to our sofa, demurely clutching her cloak. She could still sit like a person, and I noticed, as she nibbled daintily at her sandwich and coffee, that her hands, although thick and stony, had not yet become hooves. It was remarkable. Even as a half deer, Jane Eyre was quite the lady.

My mother sat across from her, watching. Jane left very few crumbs, and even those landed on her plate. When she finished, she handed me the empty plate and coffee cup. “Lives in transformation,” her eyes said, “are full of hunger.” I wondered if my mother understood her.

Outside, Jane shucked the brown cloak. The pearly moonlight shone on her fur. Fully animal, she ran back into the woods behind our house. I handed the empty plate and cup to my mother. She placed two hefty sandwiches on the plate and filled the cup with steaming coffee. Trembling, I mounted the stairs to the attic. What would my father be doing? Would he be chained to his bed? Or getting ready to dance in fire?