

# The Scent of Desire

by John Brown

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Ronald Wolf knew his deceased lovers had come back to make trouble when a large mallard tumbled like a drunkard out of a blue sky and smashed onto his porch. He could read the signs: he knew that the women had begun hiding out in the woods again when a family of skunks fumigated his front door. He knew at least that Polly, his first lover, had resurfaced when he found "Adulterer" and "Death" written on all his windows with some substance that evaporated with the afternoon sun.

Polly--thank the Lord she hadn't survived--had done such things before. But for two days Ronald had pushed the thought of his dead lovers aside.

In the back of his mind, yes, he heard alarms. But the fact was that the living Emma Dixon occupied most of his thoughts--Emma Dixon and the meadowlarks they'd heard together on an innocent stroll out past Old Man Buckey's place. Emma Dixon who knew that the secret to a good, hard ice cream was at least five hearty laughs.

She'd showed him that secret just last night on his porch while she cranked the old ice cream maker with arms that were naked and strong. He knew that he'd always remember those rosy, naked arms and the opening to her blouse that revealed her lacy bra.

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He would remember that night for years. Not that he had many left. But for the few that remained, Emma Dixon would occupy an unfair share of his time.

Ronald had felt this way six times before. And in every case the relationship had ended in death. But the women couldn't help themselves. Not even from forty miles away they couldn't.

In fact, it was usually women from out of town whose noses began to pick up his scent. They'd smell something on the breeze each time they opened their windows to air the house. They'd recall obscure, happy incidents and moments from their past. They'd smell gardenias or rhubarb pie or, as in the case of Evonne Richards, fresh, leather-bound books. They'd catch whiffs just before entering the post office, library, or Bye Ryte Market.

Sooner or later they'd home in on Glover's Pond and bloodhound the streets that led in and out and through the town. Sooner or later they'd end up standing at Ronald's gate with their eyes closed, luxuriating in a most powerful scent.

Then Ronald would come out to be friendly, and they'd discover that what they smelled was Ronald Wolf himself.

Grace had told him he was delicious. Brenda had said it was all spring and lilacs. Polly had flared her nostrils and said, "Horses and hay, Brother Wolf. Horses and hay."

They all succumbed to his scent, his aura, his whatever the hell it was. They all looked at him with fire in their eyes. They all decided to give themselves to him out there, on the spot, in his waist-high garden of whispering grasses and wild flowers.

Color, beauty, height, size--none of that mattered to Ronald. He had welcomed them all. He was a sensitive lover of women, and it was only a matter of time before they awoke his passion. Only a matter of time, before he had burned them up.

#

Emma stood at the sink in a peony print dress washing pancake batter out of an enormous ceramic mixing bowl.

"I know men when the lights go out." She didn't want Ronald getting any wrong ideas. This wasn't going to be a love-in.

"On my honor, I won't touch you," Ronald said, "you can turn off the light. Lock the door, if that will make you feel better."

She had principles. Just because a man made her feel like creme puffs inside, didn't mean she had to go all to pieces. But it was more than creme puffs with Ronald. She was wired and loose. Muddled and sharp. She was like a car racing about on two wheels. She looked out the window. "The moon's going to come up over there. You can see it like headlights on the other side of a hill."

"Emma."

"Don't you Emma me." She didn't trust herself, that's what it was. She was feeling like a girl so caught up with a man she might do anything at all. And maybe for Ronald, maybe for all the enlightened women of the day it was nothing to stay a chaste night in her boyfriend's bed, but, for Emma, staying went against everything she'd been raised to believe was appropriate when a man and a woman courted. No matter that Ronald had offered to sleep in the kitchen.

For Emma, staying was like living on the edge, and tonight she felt especially susceptible to temptation.

"Maybe you'd like to see the moon rise? Twenty minutes and we can be up on Blue Ridge."

"Fresh air would do me good," she said. Anything to clear her mind. But her mind was clear--she wanted Ronald. But she just couldn't believe the intensity of her emotions. This wasn't love, that was for sure: love percolated over time.

And this wasn't infatuation. She'd been infatuated before and never had an appetite like this. Ronald was a perfect watermelon. She could eat up pounds of his watery sweetness. She could eat until she was digging rind and she'd still want more.

Something faint told her it was dangerous to be so doped up with a man. But she ignored it. Instead she turned to Ronald in his overalls and said, "What you got for the bugs?"

They walked at a brisk pace through the woods, Emma not wanting Ronald to think he had a wimp in tow, and Ronald just trying to keep up. He said it was easier to see with the light, but she grabbed it out of his hands and turned it off.

Ronald made her bold. "No flashlight," she said. "There's no adventure unless it's dark." The path was easy to follow, a clearly blacker strip running through grass and bush. Besides, the light was mucking up her night vision and she wanted to see the woods in the dark.

At one point Ronald asked for the light back. "I'm missing the view," he said.

"What view?"

"The backside of Mother Nature," he said.

"My, my, my," she said, never having imagined herself attractive in that way at forty-seven.

Another few steps and she took his hand. Dangerous and bold. A far cry from anything anyone would expect from the woman who'd raised five kids and managed the Dixon dairy. A

far cry from anything Emma had ever expected herself. The crickets and cicada's filled the night with a thrumming song. Maybe she'd stay the night.

Just because she stayed in some man's bed didn't mean she wanted him in there with her. She was a big girl. She could hold a little romance in her heart and not act on it.

Her hand felt hopelessly small in his, but she gave him a squeeze, and he squeezed back.

Emma considered that given time and no awful surprises, this just might be the second man she'd marry. She gave his hand another squeeze and wondered if her feelings were just the reactions of a woman too long without love. Then she decided she didn't care.

The moon was just about to break over the mountains. Emma said, "I'm feeling as loose as one of those scruffy Nevada Mustangs."

#

The moon did rise up the back of Blue Ridge, but so did the ghosts of six women.

Ronald stood on an outcropping of rock that stuck up like the bow of a sinking ship. Emma had stopped ten feet below him to gather her skirts. She wasn't one to wear panty hose. He didn't blame her. He could never figure why women had started wearing them in the first place.

He looked back at her. He'd have to control himself this time. He'd almost made it a year with Brenda, but then one time he'd slipped. One time and she went up in a lemon-scented smoke.

Since Brenda's death he'd lived for weeks at a time in a numbing, gray fog. There was neither hope nor despair, joy nor pain, only a series of tasks that needed to be done.

When the desire began to bubble and cook in his gut, he'd planned to send Emma away. And if she wouldn't go, then he'd get in his truck and drive like hell. He knew how his desire ebbed and flowed. He knew when a touch would ignite a woman like flash paper.

He refused to do it this time with Emma. This time he'd grow old in love.

Ronald felt hope for the first time in many months. Not long ago Ronald had gone out and bought a roll of duct tape. He figured that was the best way to rig up a section of garden hose from his truck's exhaust to the passenger window.

But Ronald couldn't follow through. He had sat in the kitchen holding the roll of tape into the wee hours of the morning. And when dawn finally broke, Ronald knew it was too late. His mood had lifted a bit. He had work to do. So the tape went out into the garage, and now with Emma around, that tape would stay there.

"Emma, the moon's as big as it's going to get."

"I'm coming," she said and stepped up onto a generous ledge.

Ronald couldn't help but notice how shadowy and pale the moonlight made her legs. Strong legs, and as she climbed closer, he could see that they were hairy as well. He liked that. He liked her brown shoes with waffle-iron soles. Emma was animal, and proud of it.

"When I was a girl," she said, still climbing, "I used to think god lived on the moon."

"Maybe he still does."

"I could go out any time of night as long as the moon was looking down on me, and I'd feel safe."

Ronald caught a flash in the corner of his eye.

"I thought moonlight was the color of angels, and when I died I'd go there, cause that's where heaven was, and I would ride the moon like some Ferris wheel around the earth."

He looked into the woods past Emma. A flicker of gray between two pines. Another at the base of the rock.

Damn.

He could see Isabel halfway up a birch, waving at him, flickering like an old black-and-white movie. He could see Brenda, decidedly skinnier than she had been in life, landing on the rock. Evonne, Grace, and Maria clustered on the trail.

Polly. Polly was nowhere to be seen, which was more dangerous than he'd wanted things at the moment. The ghosts of jealous women couldn't be trusted.

It's a fact that ghosts can't fly, and they certainly can't pass through walls, which shows just how far you can trust fairy tales. It seemed they could affect things in Ronald's world, but not consistently. His dead lovers had orchestrated a microburst once, abusing his garbage can on the driveway, then whipping it a hundred yards above Doug Yule's house to spin like some UFO, but such an event must have drained them, because Ronald didn't see even a glimmer of his lovers for almost a year afterwards.

Still, ghosts can jump like moon men. They have bodies. And Ronald figured that made them mortal. He'd never killed one, but he'd grabbed hold of Polly once and given her a good shaking. He hadn't been able to hold on though. She slipped out of his grasp like a fish, jumped out his window and up on his neighbor's roof where she gestured every obscenity she knew until the dawn washed her out. So if these lovers decided to block his way, he could karate chop a path through them.

But he didn't want the situation to develop that far. He didn't want Emma to learn about them, not yet. After sending the dead mallard and the skunks, these ghosts probably couldn't do

much but talk. But talking was far too much. They'd poison Emma against him, as sure as cows ate grass.

Emma straightened next to him. "Wow. I can see the ponds."

"We've got to go," he said.

"What?"

"It isn't safe out here."

Emma looked at him.

"Please," he said. He could go down first and boot Brenda off the rock.

"If you're worried about falling," Emma said, "why'd you climb up in the first place?"

"I just remembered that this place is infested with spiders," Ronald said. "Honest. A guy got bit last week and his hand swelled up and turned brown. They might have to cut it off."

Emma looked at her feet.

"They're pouncers. These spiders can jump...ten feet maybe. They don't need webs."

"Ronald, you are so full of crap."

"Please."

She looked back at the moon, the valley. "All right. Whatever."

But it was too late. Ronald could see Polly descending toward them. Who knows which tree she'd jumped out of. Emma turned to follow Ronald, but instead got Polly in her face.

Emma started. "Whoa," she said and batted at the ghost.

"Girl," Polly said in her faint voice, taking Emma by the ears. "You're an idiot. He'll burn--"



Ronald grabbed Polly by a leg and flung her with all his might off the side of the ridge. He knew that she'd float the two hundred feet to the bottom and come back to torment him, but at least he'd gotten her out of the way for now.

Emma watched Polly's ghost float out into the night. "What the heck was that?"

"Plastic bag," Ronald said.

"I thought it said, 'You're an idiot.' A faint voice. I'm sure of it."

"Right," Ronald said.

Brenda sprang and jumped. She zoomed up the rock and when her head was level with Ronald's boot, he punted her out toward Polly. "Damn litterbugs," he said.

"It's the hooligan beer drinkers," Emma offered. "All I ever see in the woods is empty beer cans."

At the bottom of the rock Emma untied her skirts. Isabel was no longer in the tree. The others blocked the path ten feet ahead. Ronald wasn't fast enough to take out all three. He had to get them to move. "I just remembered there's a short cut," Ronald said and pointed down the hill.

It worked. Evonne, Grace, and Maria jumped over the ledge.

"But it's a little too treacherous at night." He grabbed Emma's hand and walked underneath the three ghosts who were still rising to the apex of their arch.

Of course, the women didn't give up the chase. They almost caught him stone-stepping across Talbot Creek, but Ronald was too smart to be outmaneuvered by a pack of ghosts. When he reached the house, he shut all the windows, locked the door, and closed the flue. They weren't going to take Emma away from him.

Not tonight.

#

Emma had expected Ronald's bed to stink. But the sheets were crisp, and the quilt smelled of a flower she couldn't put her finger on. The smell reminded her of sunlight and lying in the grass under apple blossoms. She couldn't remember how it had felt to fall in love with her husband Bill, but it must have been like this. He had been the most dependable man a woman could ever find. Dependable in love. Dependable in life. He'd died from cigarettes, may the tobacco industry rot.

Her mind told her she should leave, but in her heart she felt peace. Peace and something similar to the weirdness she'd felt when her son had thought to make a joke and bake hashish into his sister's birthday cake.

Ronald had a cheap dresser with bright-red knobs. He hung his pants on the bedposts. He lined his shoes up underneath the foot of the bed. She had never liked a man in overalls, not until yesterday. And it had been a tender gesture for him to pull the blinds and tuck her in before he went to sleep in the kitchen on a cot he'd bought years ago down at the Army Surplus.

She'd almost told him the cot wasn't necessary. But Ronald had seen the look in her eyes and said, "We're going to take this relationship slow. I'll be just fine in the kitchen."

"God," she whispered to the ceiling. "Let this be right." Maybe it wasn't her lot to die a lonely woman. She imagined sleeping with Ronald in this bed. To have a man warm and scratchy at her back. She could learn to enjoy that again. She looked at the window. However, he'd have to learn to sleep with the blinds open. She threw back the covers and sat up, and that's when the ghost came crawling out from underneath the bed.

Emma almost screamed, but before she could catch her breath, the ghost knelt down at her knees, in a pose of pleading, almost praying, and she was so beautiful that Emma couldn't help bending over for a closer look. That's when she heard the ghost say in an almost inaudible

voice, "He's a royal idiot, that one." The ghost jerked a chin toward the kitchen. "Can you hear me?"

Emma's eyes widened.

"So, you're not deaf." The ghost stood up. "Listen to me: I ran the whole way here as soon as Polly jumped at you. That stuff up on the ridge was just a diversion. I'm lover number four. Isabel."

"What?"

"Isabel."

What kind of man kept ghosts under his bed?

"Hey." Isabel clapped her hands in front of Emma's face. "Don't go wimping out on me, girl."

Emma closed her eyes, took a deep breath, counted to three. The ghost was still there.

"Ah, hell," Emma said.

"That's right," Isabel said. "Now listen. Ronald had six lovers and burned every one of them up." She laid a hand on Emma's arm that was soft as sunlight on a spring day. "You've got a choice. Leave him. Die in ecstasy. Or kill him. We'd actually prefer the latter because we still pick up his scent when he goes into heat or whatever it is, and if he were, well, on this side of life, then we could do something about him."

"Ronald burned you up?" Ronald was too sweet to commit such horror.

"It's not what you think," she said. "It was the burning heat of his desire."

"Ronald?" He'd never mentioned anyone named Isabel.

"He's a loving man. And you can't slake him. Not as you are."

Ronald had never once gone beyond the limits of decorum. He didn't cuss. He didn't lie.

Her Ronald?

"Look. You've only known him two days."

"But--"

"Wake up. Ronald Wolf is a serial killer." Isabel pointed at the window. "Pull the blinds."

Emma did. And crowding the pane were the flickering faces of one, two, three, four, five women.

At that moment Emma heard Ronald creaking down the hallway to the bedroom.

"Quick," Isabel said and pointed at the window. "Let me out."

Ronald tapped the door. "Emma?"

Emma opened the window. "Yes?"

Isabel said something inaudible and the ghosts scattered.

"You okay?" He asked through the door.

"Come in. I'm decent."

Ronald swung the door in and looked at the window. Emma followed his gaze. Nothing but moonlight.

"What are you thinking?" Ronald said. "I haven't got any screens."

"It was too beautiful."

"You'll think 'too beautiful' when the mosquitoes home in on your face." He walked to the window, cautiously scanned his backyard, then shut the window.

"Not the blinds," Emma said. "I'll feel like I'm in a cave."

Ronald peered through the glass. When the silence had gone on too long, he said. "I came to tell you that there's an extra blanket on top in the closet."

Not my Ronald, she thought. Not my considerate, sensitive Ronald.

"Anyway, goodnight."

As he left, he shut the bedroom door behind him, but he didn't go to his room. She heard the front screen door slam. Heard his footsteps grind the gravel out front and stop somewhere near the shed.

Nobody said ghosts couldn't lie. Emma lay back down on the bed. She'd always trusted her heart. She suspected that she'd know if she were in danger; she had that sense.

Of all the things...ghosts wanting her to murder a man.

Still, they could be right. And if they were? Running wouldn't help. Leaving Ronald would be like fasting. She'd have to come back eventually. She might die if she stayed, but she doubted it. Everything about this felt right ... except for the ghosts, and they could be ignored.

What was she thinking? She'd just talked to a ghost! Ronald had turned her brains into a pudding.

Emma lay on the bed wondering if she wanted to flee and trying to feel shocked that she'd even consider staying. But she couldn't feel shocked. It simply wasn't in her. And she wasn't going to flee, so if she was going to die, she wanted to know it. And if the ghosts were imaginings, she wanted to know that as well.

She and Ronald were going to have a chat. And if he wanted to stab her to death, then let him do it like an honest man. She had lived a good life, and Bill was waiting on the other side. Besides, she'd heard that willing victims turned wackos off.

She put on her slippers and walked out into the hallway. "Ronald, get in here. You and I need to talk." She opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. "Ronald?" That, of course, brought him running.

#

Emma sat at the table across from Ronald. She pushed a thick strand of dark hair behind her ear. "What do you mean it comes and goes?"

"It comes and goes." He looked at Emma with honest eyes. "I never wanted to kill them. I loved them."

"But you didn't tell them."

"I didn't know what the hell happened the first two times. And I did tell Evonne I'd burn her up with my loving. She'd heat up with desire and--poof. But all she would do is kiss my hand and say things like, 'You're my backwoods Byron,' and 'There you go with your metaphors of love.' With the others ..." He hung his head again. "With the others I was lonely and weak. But I almost made it with Brenda. This time it's going to work, Emma."

He had been completely forthright. She sensed no insincerity. It must be horrible to see your lovers go up in smoke.

"I thought that maybe with you I could hold back. I thought that maybe you and I could grow old together."

She could see by the set of his jaw that he was going to pack her off. But she didn't want to go. It was that smell of desire. That smell was pulling at her now, and she realized that it had come and gone these last two days. What she wanted now was for him to look at her, see how she ached for him to touch her, see that she trusted him. She'd been alone for so long.

Emma knew men. She knew how deep her desire could go.

"Maybe those other women shorted out." She took his hand and pulled him up. "Maybe they didn't give enough back." She kissed him. The first kiss she'd allowed.

Ronald said, "I'm cursed."

"It's just the smell of your good soul," she said. "And it's delicious."

They kissed again, and she recognized the smell.

"Grass," she said. "Fresh cut grass and Autumn leaves." And then the heat began working like tendrils through her.

He took her hand and led her to the bedroom. The heat softened every muscle. She sat on the edge of the bed and caressed his hand and arm. He cupped the back of her head and sent goose bumps down her arms.

"Are you sure you want to stay?"

"Positive," she said and looked up at him. He did not have a pretty or dignified face. His face was weathered and hard and kind, and she knew she had made the right choice to stay with him.

He slipped her nightgown off one shoulder, traced a line along her neck, and kissed her back. "You're warm," he said.

"I feel like I'm floating in a summer sea." She didn't want to consummate a marriage that hadn't happened, but she could make love like this for hours. It had been a long time since she had necked. Besides, she and Ronald had discussed morality their first evening and Ronald agreed with her views. So when he kissed her collar bone, she didn't flinch. He wasn't going anywhere with this.

She tipped her head back so he could more easily kiss her neck. And when he slid his hand underneath her nightgown and stroked her thigh, she nibbled on his ear. However, the heat

kept building, and with that building, her desire bunched and tightened in her loins, her breasts, her skin.

They kissed and caressed, dallying on the edge of chastity until Emma no longer wanted to stop herself. She opened his shirt. When she stroked his chest, she noticed for the first time that he glowed soft as a lightning bug.

"No," he said. "Emma, please." And tried to close his shirt.

But she held his hands, took a fine curve of skin next to his nipple into her mouth, and gently tugged.

"Oh, lord," he said. "No." Then he backed away from her and ran.

She sat on the edge of the bed reveling in the warmth, the tingle on her lips, and the earthy smell of rich loam. A fine man Ronald Wolf was, respecting her limits when she'd been ready to let herself go too far. She lay back, and then everything turned yellow-green and the color took her.

#

Ronald walked into the house with muddied boots and found Emma still in her nightgown. She stood by the oven with flour on her jaw.

He sniffed, looked at her mixing bowl. "What is that?"

"Gingersnaps," she said.

He sat at the table. This was not going to work. He'd driven five hours last night before the desire ebbed. He grabbed a glass of water that stood on the counter, drank a sip, and spit it out. "What the hell is in here?"

Emma hooted. "It's baking soda," she said. "I felt a little nauseated this morning when I woke up."



Brenda had done that. A bad sign, a very bad sign. "It's no good between us," Ronald said. "Next time I'm not going to be able to pull back like I did last night."

"I'm okay," Emma said.

"No you're not. Hell, with Grace we were just reading in the parlor. I reached over and held her hand, and the next minute she flashed and took all the hair off my arm."

He was dangerous and selfish. Couldn't Emma see that? She was going to die unless he did what should have been done long ago.

"I can't leave you."

"I never wanted you to." He poured her some apple juice out of the jug and stared out the window at the sun shining off his flagstone path.

A bullet to the head would make things quick and clean. He was a decent man, and decent men didn't have a right to kill women, even if they came willingly.

"There's got to be somebody who knows about this stuff," Emma said. "Don't you know some Indian or crazy prophet?"

"Emma. Nobody knows what I've got. I don't even know how I do it myself. I just start thinking that I need someone. I start feeling hollow inside and somebody shows up."

"I don't care if I die."

"You'd care if you're brains weren't stewed with my scent." He could see that's what she'd wanted him to say.

"But I am stewed," she said. "That's the point."

"I'm going back to work," he said. "Doug Bills needs some help with his sheep."

"I'll be here when you get back."

"No," he said. "You won't." She was too confident, Emma was. She thought they'd overcome this together as if lover burning was just one of those obstacles couples faced, but she'd end up tempting him longer than he had power to resist.

Except, he reminded himself, this time he'd decided to remove himself from the situation--permanently.

#

That evening, with a pot of her own beef goulash and pan of corn bread covered to keep warm, Emma waited for Ronald like she waited for cows to calf--no rushing about, she figured he'd come when he was good and ready. She waited until sun down, sat on the porch in Ronald's rocker and waited until it occurred to her that Ronald wasn't coming back.

She called Doug Bills, who said they'd finished early that afternoon. She called Ida's Cafe--which served the best chicken fried steak Ronald said he'd ever eaten--and found he hadn't been in for days. Finally, she called the sheriff's office, and the deputy there said in her undeputylike voice that Ronald was probably out somewhere fixing somebody's something, but that they'd be on the lookout.

The bugs made a racket in the darkness, screeching, droning, trilling. Moths fluttered and careened about Ronald's porch light. She could smell him out there. She could almost point in his direction. She didn't need any sheriff or bimbo deputy to bring him home.

Emma kept her pickup in second and drove with the windows rolled down. South of Glover's Pond she followed him. South and then east along a smooth dirt road that would take her to Whitney if she let it. Maybe a mile down the road she saw his truck in a clearing, drove up to the campfire, and shined him with her high beams.

He didn't move.

Something white leaned in her window.

Isabel.

Emma stepped out of the truck. "What's going on?" She could see the other ghosts vanishing and reappearing as they waltzed in and out of her high beams. The smell of Ronald washed over her.

They were dancing?

"You did it!" said Isabel.

Emma could barely hear her over the truck's engine. She turned the ignition off. "What?"

"He's dying--as we speak."

"What?"

"A bullet through his heart."

"No!"

Emma flung the door open and ran to him. Ronald wheezed and rattled and gurgled in short breaths. A .22 rifle lay askew on the ground.

"Ronald!" She kneeled next to him. A neat circle of blood soaked his tee-shirt. Could ghosts do this? Lure him into the woods and shoot him?

He moved his head toward her, almost opened one of his eyes, then began to cough and spasm, trying to get air.

Get him to the clinic, that's what she needed to do--take him in the back of the truck.

She tried to help him up, but he couldn't stand. He didn't know what was going on.

Drowning in blood. She tried to pick him up, tried to drag him and failed.

The ghosts flickered around her. "Emma," Isabel called.

"What!" Emma said and turned on her. "Stay away!" She waved her arm to clear them away from her and knocked Isabel back. That surprised Emma. She'd never known it was possible to smack a ghost. Then she got an idea. Maybe if she dragged Ronald on her back-- pulled his arms over her shoulders.

She hunkered down, set his wrists on her shoulders, and heaved upward. He moved. She could do this. But five steps later he began hacking and shuddering with such violence it scared her.

She let him back down. There was no use in this. She wouldn't be able to lift him into the pickup bed anyway.

A pebble struck her arm. Another struck her head. She looked up and saw the ghosts brighter than she'd ever seen them, shining like white china. They looked as tangible and smooth as figurines. A rock bounced into the turf next to her. Isabel came at her with a smoking branch.

Emma dodged aside and watched Isabel turn hot white and vanish. The branch fell into the grass and glowed red at its tip. Emma looked up at the other ghosts and watched them wink out one by one.

At first she worried that this was some disappearing trick, that suddenly a ghost would appear behind her with a knife in its hands. But the ghosts didn't reappear. Maybe they'd burned themselves out like Ronald said they could, trying to project themselves into a dimension in which they didn't belong. Who knew the physical laws ghosts were bound by?

Ronald had said the dead Isabel once laid a strangled chicken at his doorstep. Why hadn't his lovers killed him before now? Could they? Emma couldn't shake the feeling that those dead women stood right behind her.

The campfire popped. Emma turned around once, twice. Ronald wheezed and lay still. To hell with the ghosts, she thought. Either they kill me or they don't.

She stroked his hair. "Ronald, don't you die on me."

He coughed. If he'd shot himself in the heart, he'd be dead by now. Lying ghosts. He must have blown a hole in a lung.

"I'm not like those others," she said. "I've got fire in me you can't imagine." She sat him up straight. "Ronald! Dammit. Help me get you to the truck." To her surprise Ronald grabbed her shoulder and struggled to get to his knees.

#

They made it to the hospital in Thurston. A doctor drained the fluid and inserted a chest tube to help Ronald's lung re-inflate. Miraculously, the bullet hadn't created a hole big enough to require surgery. Emma held his hand the whole time and smelled her grandmother's spicy geraniums.

She'd been selfish. She'd been just like all the others. Ronald hadn't killed those women. They'd killed themselves because they had wanted the ecstasy Ronald could give them more than they had wanted Ronald.

What they'd felt was desire, not love. They didn't give anything in return. They didn't have anything to give. Parasites is what they were, parasites trying to freeload off a miracle. And she wasn't any better than the rest.

Early the next morning a nurse wheeled Ronald to a room, and after watching the nurse fuss with his IV and chest tube apparatus, Emma fell asleep on a wide orange chair next to Ronald's bed. She awoke to the murmuring of women in the hallway and found Ronald watching her.

"I tried," he said.

Emma shook her head. "I was selfish."

Ronald looked away.

Would he try suicide again? Yes. He didn't want to go, Emma could see that, but Emma knew Ronald would try again. The certainty sat in her as calm and solid as a stone. And the next time Ronald would do a good job of it. "I'm leaving," Emma said and stood.

"Somebody else will show up."

"I can't help that. I won't be like the others. God has worked something strange with you."

Ronald put a hand to his chest. "God? What makes you so sure this ain't some recessive monkey gene? What makes you think this isn't something like moths? Hell, they can smell each other out miles apart."

Emma leaned over him and kissed his forehead. His bangs were matted with sweat. "And who created the moths?" She trembled. "I've got to go now, Ronald."

"I love you," Ronald whispered. She traced his eyebrow and cheek with the back of one finger.

Then the room began to whirl and Emma fled.

#

She didn't completely shake Ronald's feel until three days later when she stepped off a plane hundreds of miles west in Seattle, and even then a pang of desire would shoot up her thighs every now and again and make her stumble. She'd given Hector, her hired help, the reigns at the dairy, and then called her oldest to tell him she was coming to stay for a while. It had been two years since she'd seen him and his wife, and they could sure as hell tolerate her in their spare bedroom. They wouldn't even know she was there.

For the first few days Emma thought she'd beaten the desire. She ate like she'd just stepped off the boat from Africa. She walked for miles. She even clapped her hands and danced for two young street musicians playing a clarinet and guitar and looking for all the world like they were wearing their fathers' pants. And much to her surprise, she found that her daughter-in-law had a winning sense of humor.

But it didn't last. She missed Ronald. She craved Ronald.

"Mother," her son said one evening well into the second week. "What is it with your hands?" The TV showed some scientist talking about pollution levels around Bainbridge Island.

"What?" She said.

"You're fidgeting like some druggie."

"I don't know."

"Well, knock it off. All I can do is watch your freaking hands."

Emma tried to hold her hands, tried to concentrate on what the woman on TV was saying but couldn't. She couldn't stop thinking of how it had felt to have Ronald's hand on her thigh. She couldn't stop herself from imagining how the touch of Ronald's lips and hands could satisfy the craving she felt from her legs to her neck. So she left the house and walked until she could think of something besides Ronald. Around eleven o'clock the craving subsided.

Dear God, she thought. That craving had been as tiring as contractions. Then it occurred to her that if she could endure three births without painkillers, she could endure Ronald Wolf.

Emma believed that in most things you needed to stand up and fight first. She had seen her orange tom face down all kinds of dogs, but if that cat ever ran, ever looked away, that's all it took, and those dog would harry him to the trees.

She had planned on visiting each of her three children and then spending a month with her parents. But all visiting did was give her mind time to wander. All she was doing was running.

She could detox better at home. At least there she'd have something to occupy her thoughts. Having decided to face her problems, Emma realized she'd been walking dark sidewalks in a big city at night. Her heart jumped. Fool woman. Well, there was nothing to do but move, so she set off for her son's place, hips swinging in what would be one of her fastest speed walks since she stopped exercising with Louise Kelley.

Two days later she boarded a red-eye to Louisville.

She found Hector half-way down the row of milking stalls, hooking a heifer up to the milk pump. She tapped him on the shoulder. "Play," she said. "Go enjoy your wife and kids. It's time you had a paid vacation."

If she was going to fight her desire, Emma was going to need all the work she could find.

#

Emma stood over her gas stove, fluffing the rice for a rice pudding which she would have for dinner because she wasn't in the mood to eat anything else. She'd smelled Ronald twice today. Once when she had to get up on top of the hay stack to tip a stubborn column of bales. And just now. It was autumn leaves again. She wondered how he had healed, if he was back home right now. She could call him just to make sure everything was all right.

But calling would make staying away that much harder. No. She wouldn't call. She'd bake her pudding, eat it, and sleep. So she walked into her front room and began playing the Fiddler on the Roof CD her daughter had sent her last Christmas. And thank the Lord she'd done



the work of three men today, because while she waited for the pudding to bake, she could think of nothing but Ronald. Only exhaustion held her in Bill's recliner chair until the timer dinged.

She ate the pudding hot with milk and bottled peaches. There had to be some way they could love one another without her dying. There was a trick to everything, wasn't there? It was just a matter of figuring it out.

However, Emma didn't get much time to think. After finishing two bowls of pudding she decided she was too tired to brush her teeth and went straight to bed. She set her alarm and then pulled that soft Wal Mart blanket up to her nose.

Emma dreamed of her and Ronald riding two roans whose tails and manes flowed black and smooth as ink. She dreamed of an electrical storm whose lightening split and scorched seven trees. She dreamed of Ronald singing on the Lawrence Welk show, wearing long, green and yellow scarves, and tap dancing like Gene Kelley. Then the buzzer on her alarm woke her. Five o'clock. Time for the first milking.

She had to squint to keep her eyes open, but she pulled on the jeans she'd worn yesterday and headed out into the dark. The screen door squeaked and slammed behind her. The cows mooed. The stars shone clear and quiet. She walked to the barn with a slice of jack cheese in one hand, a Coke in the other, and Ronald on the wind.

#

Ronald watched the tall woman in her cream, suit jacket and sun glasses walk past his house three times. Then she opened his gate and marched up the walk. Her red fingernails flashed in the sunlight.

When she rang the doorbell, Ronald ripped the door open and said, "What the hell do you want?" He kept the screen door latched.

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The woman put a hand to her chest and said, "Why, I'm sorry. I hope I didn't disturb you." She set her sunglasses on her head.

Ronald could see it in her eyes. She was blind with the scent. He could have been a dog for all she cared.

"Yes, you did. Now get."

"But don't you smell it?" she said.

Ronald said nothing.

She looked down. "Of course you don't," she said and fingered her bracelet.

"You get off my porch," Ronald said. "I don't want no druggies on my porch."

"No," the woman said. "Sorry." She slid her glasses back down over her eyes and walked to the front gate. An hour she loitered in front of Ronald's house and then drove off in some Japanese outfit.

She came back a few days later. And again a few days after that. Each time Ronald stood behind the screen door and brusquely shooed her away.

Five more women showed up over the course of the next year, and Ronald treated each the same as the first. Ronald almost opened the door for the last. She had skin the color of the good earth and hair braided in cornrows that fell to her shoulders. He found her sitting barefoot on his porch swing when he came home from delivering Mrs. Early a load of coal.

"Good evening," she had said.

"No it's not," Ronald said and stomped past her. She sat on his porch swing all through dinner and the news. And Ronald had almost let her in, but then he remembered Emma. He remembered how hard it had been to pull away from her that evening in his bedroom, and so he called the sheriff.

When the woman left, the sheriff stood with Ronald in his driveway and said, "What is it with you, Ronald?"

"I don't know, Dennis. Bad genes, I guess."

"Hell," the sheriff said. "I'd give an arm and a leg for some of those bad genes."

"No," Ronald said. "You'd have to give up far more than that."

"Who? Meg?" The sheriff laughed. "My wife ain't worth that much."

Ronald said nothing. He wondered how long he could live like this.

The sheriff lit up a cigarette and said, "I'm calling it a night." He pulled out of the driveway in his Ford Bronco, gave his lights a whirl, then sped off for town like somebody had just robbed the bank.

That night Ronald lay in bed thinking about Emma and saw a flicker of light outside. The light flickered again. He got out of bed and went to his window.

Nothing.

He walked into his front room and saw his lovers outside his kitchen.

He'd never really loved those women, not like he loved Emma. He been juiced up with them. Desired them. His relationships with them had been like running rivers out west. He'd never made it past the rapids with these women, never made it to the other side of the white water.

But with Emma it was different. The desire for her body had been overshadowed by a desire for her welfare.

He opened the drapes to his front window and watched his lovers gather in his flowers. The tall delphiniums and orange poppies swayed as the ghosts brushed past. Then his lovers began to call to him.

Polly was not herself; there were no threats. Instead she mouthed over and over, "I love you, Ronald. I miss you."

Ronald missed something. He tried to tell himself that this emotional hunger was all biology like chimpanzees needing grooming, but that didn't help. He still ached inside. He ached for all these women, even Polly.

Maybe Ronald should buy himself a dog. But Ronald didn't want to care for a dog. He didn't have time for walks and feedings. And he sure as heck wasn't going to buy a fine animal to lock it up in a run in the back.

Brenda put her shining hands to the window. She wasn't mouthing anything. She simply looked at Ronald with her large eyes. In life they had been blue like corn flowers.

He had got them all caught in some lover's afterworld limbo. "I used you," he shouted through the glass. "I used you all!"

They continued to speak to him. Maybe they had something to say, a plan. Maybe as ghosts they knew more about the spiritual side of existence. So Ronald went to the front door and opened it wide.

They walked slowly towards him until they stood around him in a circle. Their warm, white hands touched his face, his hair, his arms. They whispered love. Evonne embraced him and then caressed his face with her waist-length hair like she had done when they first met. It felt like the slightest brush of silk.

Then Polly stood in front of him. She leaned up to his ear and said, "Ronald, this is no life for you. Come with us. We've learned to make peace."

"You can break this curse?"

"No," she said. "Only you can break it."

He could end it now with his lovers around him. Or he could wait until he died some other way. What did a few years of loneliness matter?

"Did you ever love me?" he said.

"We need you," Isabel said. The others murmured their agreement.

"How do I break this?" he asked.

Grace put her mouth to his ear. "It's passion," she said. "You wait it out, or you feed it until you're satiated."

"I tried that already."

"Then shed your body, Ronald," Isabel said. "Ghosts can't die. You can feed it on this side of life."

Did Ronald want to be a ghost? Would he even become a ghost when he died? Was there some qualification for ghosthood? Or would he just cease to exist like those two Jehovah Witness ladies had told him he would? He had no idea how things worked after death.

"How do you know this will work?" he said.

"We don't," Brenda said.

"We're ghosts," Evonne said at the same time.

Ronald saw Brenda glance at Polly, and when he followed Brenda's gaze he could have sworn that Polly had been glaring at her.

She'd shushed Brenda. Ronald had caught it.

"What?" he demanded.

Brenda looked at Ronald's other lovers and then folded her arms. "Lying to him won't help," Brenda said to his other lovers. "We're desperate women, Ronald."

"Here we go," Isabel said.

"Ronald," Brenda said. "I'm speaking honestly. Death may not help, but it's your only alternative. Ghosts can't die--we've shed the corruptible. Maybe it's only true spirit that can connect with true spirit. Maybe there's no other way for this passion, this energy to conduct."

They had come here to trick him, come to push him over the edge when things looked bleakest. And Brenda with her college education and big words was simply acting her part in a well calculated play.

"Think about it, Ronald," Grace said. "Death is only a doorway."

"Maybe you should leave," he said.

His lovers stole glances at each other and didn't move.

"I don't plan on dying any time soon," he said. "Obviously you can't do much about that, or you already would have. So move it."

They left him in a bright rush of touches and whispers. Ronald watched them until their pale light faded in the trees on the other side of the road.

Ghosts. Wiley women. What a life.

Then he thought about what Brenda had said. "Energy to conduct."

Maybe it was electricity. Maybe he was just a live wire that needed grounding. Maybe all this time what he needed was to ground his desire in something bigger than himself.

#

After the first month away from Ronald, Emma decided Ronald's scent was like arthritis. There was nothing you could do when it flared up. You just had to treat the symptoms and bear it out. Knowing that the scent would eventually leave her made it bearable.

She'd found that working as part of Hector's crew and campaigning for LeAnne Snow's bid for county Commissioner kept her too tired to do much about Ronald.

Four or five months after Ronald, Emma thought she had his craziness beat. Then almost a year to the day she had left Ronald in that hospital bed, she was fishing for a bag of fencing clips in the bottom of a five gallon bucket when Ronald's scent washed over her and made her shiver. It hadn't been that strong for quite some time.

She found the clips and stood up, and another wave of the scent rolled over her; she lost her legs and sat with a thud in the dust.

Ronald was coming. Her head was buzzing, but she knew that much.

When her mind cleared, she made her way out of the barn. Emma stood in the middle of the road with her arms crossed when he came barreling up the road in his rust-dotted, baby-blue Ford pickup.

That damn man. She'd had this thing beat, and he had to get weak on her.

Ronald turned off the road in a cloud of dust. "Emma," he said and swung the door open. "Emma, I've got it!"

She had to close her eyes keep herself from running to him.

"Emma, it's all electrons and wires."

Emma opened her eyes and watched him approach. She couldn't really understand him. All she knew is that the world smelled of grass. She could not remember the scent ever being this strong.

He stood right in front of her, grinning like he'd just won first prize at the pie bake-off.

"Emma," he said and touched her shoulder.

The heat didn't hurt. That surprised her. She felt it spread like an itch. So this is how it ends, she thought.

"Ronald," she said. She'd miss him. She wondered if Bill or Ronald's dead lovers would greet her on the other side.

Ronald's eyes went wide and he took a step back. "No," he said. "No!"

There was a bright flash and a cloud of yellow smoke that started her coughing. When the smoke cleared she saw Ronald on his knees in anguish. She held her arms up before her. They glowed with a bluish, white light. She looked down at her legs, belly, and chest. They too glowed with the same clear light.

At first Emma thought she was a ghost. Then the light began to dim and change color from white to yellow to a dull orange. Then the light and heat left her altogether. She felt exhilarated, clean like she'd just washed at Kenny Falls.

Ronald began to wail, then he opened his eyes and stared at her. "Your clothes," he said.

Indeed. Emma had none. All that was left was a white ash that began to flow and swirl towards the barn in a light breeze.

Her skin had returned to its normal color. She squeezed her arm and felt her chest. The breeze goosepimpled the skin all down her sides. She wasn't a ghost.

She was alive!

"Go," she said. "And find us a preacher."

#

Everybody balked--there was paperwork to be done, tests run. You couldn't just marry someone on a whim. Emma was going to talk to LeAnne about changing that. Then they found a Baptist minister in Greenville who said, "I'll marry you before God tonight, if you promise to come back tomorrow and let me marry you before the State."



Emma was afraid anything Ronald touched would ignite, but she couldn't go to the preacher buck naked. So she put on the old batik dress she'd never wanted to wear.

It would never do. She looked like one of those arts festival types. You only lived once, and if your dress burned, it burned. Emma threw that batik thing in her trash and slipped on the mauve dress with the fine lace work down the front. She smoothed the front and looked in the full-length mirror. Who would have thought she'd marry twice?

Ronald had gelled his hair back and shaved. He wore a suit that made him look like he belonged on Wall Street.

"Cuff links?" Emma asked.

"Evonne bought it for me," he said. He smoothed the front of his suit. "I don't know. I thought it was kind of nice."

"Humm," she said. What would she do with those ghosts?

The minister met them at the church. He unlocked the doors and Ronald said, "Nothing fancy. Okay?"

"Okay," the minister said. "You may call me brother Paul."

They promised for life, through sickness and health, and then brother Paul said, "You may kiss the bride."

Ronald held his hands up. "Not tonight, brother. But thanks."

Emma suppressed a smile.

Then Ronald stuffed three twenties into brother Paul's hand.

"You're a true Christian," Ronald said.

"Tomorrow," brother Paul said.

"We won't miss it," Emma said.

#

They sat on Ronald's porch, listening to the evening breathe with the sounds of insects, not daring to touch each other yet. Moths fluttered in and out of the porch light. "First thing we're going to do," Emma said, "is screen off this porch and put in a yellow bulb in that light."

"First thing," Ronald said.

They sat in silence for a while and then Ronald said, "May I hold your hand?"

"Are we ready?" Emma said.

She hadn't flashed out by her house. And he was trying to think of her, trying to be one.

"We'll never know until we try," he said.

"Maybe all we needed was some personal sacrifice," she said. "It sounds trite, but maybe that was the trick."

"Or maybe it's like Thomas Edison finding the right material for a filament. At least I didn't have to go through as many as he did."

"Ronald!" she said.

"Or maybe nothing is fixed."

Emma stood up and began to unbutton her dress. "Well I'm not going to ruin this dress finding out," she said.

Ronald looked out to the road and down to Doug Yule's house. "Emma," he said. "For heaven's sake. Go inside."

He watched her undress in the moonlight that washed through his bedroom window. And when she stood proud and naked before him, he said, "I'd believe in a God who made such a thing as you."

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Emma smiled, then took his hand and led him to the bed. Ronald traced the curve of her body from her shoulder to her knee. Then he sniffed. "So this is how it works," he said. "I just remembered one day when I was a boy. My grandpa deWaal and I had just tilled his garden. He sat on a bucket in the shade of cherry tree drinking a can of apple beer. And I ran through the soil in my bare feet. The soil was so light I'd sink up above my ankle with each step. I loved that man."

Ronald sniffed again and looked into Emma's eyes. "Is this what you've been smelling?" he said. He took a deep breath through his nose. "Grass."

"At last," Emma said, "you've finally got a taste of your own medicine." She kissed him lightly on the lips. "Maybe we're ready."

They kissed and stroked each other until their bodies shone like the moon. When Emma climaxed, everything went white. There was neither house nor bed, only the stars and the scent of the forest, of green things living and dying. Emma thought she had died and ridden that Ferris wheel around the earth, but when their bodies cooled, Emma and Ronald found themselves naked on a field of white ash.

#

The sheriff finally found Ronald out at Emma's place. "Haven't you heard?" he said over the telephone.

"What?" Ronald said.

"Doug Yule swears it was some UFO. Ronald, there's nothing left of your place."

"What?" Ronald said.

"Gone," the sheriff said. "I mean gone."

Ronald said. "I don't believe in UFO's."

"Doug says a light bright as the sun woke him up."

"Well, you know Doug," Ronald said.

"I don't know," the sheriff said. "There's a white ash out here, fine as flour. About an acre's been burnt. And you tell me--what would make a perfect circle like this?"

"Strange," said Ronald.

"Well, I'm sure the insurance adjuster is going to want to ask you some questions. You'd best get down here."

"I'd best," Ronald said.

#

Nobody could explain the burning at Ronald Wolf's place. Nor could they explain the similar circles that appeared in the woods and fields around Glover's Pond. UFO crazies began to flock to the town. A few big time reporters even came to ferret out the truth, but all they turned up was nonsense.

Doug Yule swore by all that was holy that he once saw ghosts dancing on the spot where Ronald's house had once stood.

Robert Pexton and his gal Kristi claimed that they were necking in his Camaro out by the Johnson farm when they saw a bright light. And when they went to investigate, they saw a couple run stark naked into the trees.

The circles became a stop for local tourists. The strange thing was that every once in a while Dennis Brown would have to go haul some man or woman off one of those sites. Everyone of them had gone crazy, blabbering about the scent of the place.

Dennis sent some of the ash to be tested, thinking maybe someone was running a new drug lab in his area. But every sample came back certified carbon.

And all the while Ronald and Emma worked on her dairy, the scent of their desires  
blending and mellowing with age.

THE END

## About the Author

John Brown is the author whose debut as a novelist includes the forthcoming epic fantasies from Tor: *Servant of a Dark God*, *Curse of a Dark God*, and *Dark God's Glory*. The first should be available in the Summer of 2009.

Brown's work has appeared in Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Best of the Rest 4, and The Best of Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. He also received a first prize in the Writers of the Future contest and was published in vol 13 under the name Bo Griffin. Brown currently lives with his wife & four daughters in the hinterlands of Utah where one encounters much fresh air, many good-hearted ranchers, and an occasional wolf.

## A Note from the Author

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