

NOCTURNES

Forty read-aloud scene-setters · eight moods

Pick by mood, not by die. Read one aloud, slowly, before anyone acts — then stop. Whatever your players do with the silence afterward is the scene.

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1

THE COURT

The candles are new, but the wax on the floor is old — generations deep, a pale glacier under the sconces. Whoever holds this room has been holding it a very long time, and the servants pour yours last.

2

THE COURT

Conversation does not stop when you enter. It moves — a ripple crossing the hall away from you, laughter resuming at a safer distance. Somewhere behind the fans and the wine, your name has already arrived.

3

THE COURT

The toast is raised in your honor. Every glass goes up, every eye comes down to watch you over the rim, and nobody drinks first.

4

THE COURT

The portrait gallery runs the length of the hall, a century of the same jaw and colder and colder eyes. The last frame hangs empty. The plaque beneath it is already engraved.

5

THE COURT

In the garden the hedges are taller than a man, and the gravel announces every step you take. The conversation you were following has stopped. The fountain, which was silent when you entered, has started.

6

THE STREETS

The lamplighter works his way up the row, ladder and flame, ladder and flame. He skips the lamp outside your door without breaking stride — the way a man skips a step he knows is rotten.

7

THE STREETS

The market is shuttered, the awnings dripping, the cobbles slick with cabbage leaves and rain. One stall is still lit at the far end. The vendor is looking at you as if you were late.

The evening crowd is thick, shoulder to shoulder — and parting, smoothly, around someone walking toward you. You cannot see who. But you can see the path.

The bells count the hour wrong. Eleven strokes at midnight, and nobody on the street but you seems to have counted.

The door at the end of the lane has been locked as long as anyone can remember — the hinges painted over, the step unswept. Tonight it stands ajar, and the darkness inside is warmer than the street.

The incense is thick tonight, sweet and blue in the lamplight, laid on the way plaster is laid on a crack. Underneath it, faint but patient, is the smell it was lit to cover.

The church is empty, but the kneeler at the side altar is warm, and the candle above it has just been snuffed — the smoke still climbing, straight as a plumb line, in air that should not be this still.

From the loft, choir practice: the same hymn, over and over, stopping each time at the same half-finished phrase. Whatever comes next in that verse, they will not sing it.

Every votive candle in the rack is lit. All of them, fresh, hundreds — a harvest of small fears. The offering box, when you pass it, is empty.

The confessional stands against the north wall, two doors, one lattice. As you pass, the priest's door opens. You did not see anyone go in — but you hear, distinctly, both doors close.

16

THE ROAD

Fog to the stirrups, and the milestone where the roads divide has been defaced — the destination chiseled out, recently, the stone-dust still pale in the grooves. Someone does not want the next town named.

17

THE ROAD

An inn light ahead, warm and low, exactly far enough to reach before the rain. It has been exactly that far for an hour.

18

THE ROAD

The gibbet at the crossroads is old work, grey and leaning — but the rope is new, still pale, still creaking with a weight the wind can't account for.

19

THE ROAD

The mud takes your prints cleanly. Half a mile on, it is taking a second set beside yours — same stride, same direction, no one on the road behind you when you turn.

20

THE ROAD

The coach passes you at dusk, lamps swinging, curtains drawn, moving fast. An hour later, on a road with no crossings, it passes you again. Same coach. Same direction. The curtains are open now.

21

THE HOUSE

Dust sheets over everything, furniture become white hills in the gloom. One chair is uncovered — placed square to the door you just came through, the dust on the floor around it swept by the hem of something that sat.

22

THE HOUSE

The house has been empty for years; the notice on the gate says so, the ivy in the windows agrees. But the hearth is warm under your hand, and the ash is this morning's.

23

THE HOUSE

A child's room, tidy as a museum. The game on the floor is mid-play — soldiers ranked, dice showing sixes, one piece lying on its side in the middle of the board as if it had just been taken.

Every clock in the house has stopped, each at a different hour, as if time had been leaving room by room. In the study, behind the locked door, one is still ticking.

The kitchen is cold, the larder bare, the pump dry. The smell of supper — onions, marrow, bread — is coming from the room you just ate nothing in.

The oldest stone in the yard is a flake of slate, the name two hundred years drowned in lichen. The flowers against it are fresh-cut this evening, still beaded with the florist's water.

The sexton's lodge is open, lamp burning, ledger spread on the desk mid-entry. The date being entered is tomorrow's. The name is half-written.

Frost silvers every stone in the yard, every rail, every blade of grass — except one grave, dark and wet in the white, steaming faintly, as if the ground there were breathing warmth.

The mausoleum door is bronze, green with age, heavier than three men. It is opening and closing on its hinges by the width of a finger — slow, regular, patient. The rhythm is breathing.

You know this stone; you have passed it a hundred times. But the name has been re-carved — the old letters ground away, the new ones sharp and white. It is the same name. It has one more date now.

Thirty-one steps, the keeper said, and put the count in your hand like a coin. You are at forty and the stair has not turned, and the temperature has stopped falling.

*The air rising from the shaft is warm, and it carries —
impossibly, horribly gentle — the smell of bread. Something
down there keeps a hearth.*

*Your chalk marks were faithful: an arrow at every turning, a
cross at every shaft. The arrow you are looking at now points
back the way you came. It is your chalk. It is not your mark.*

*The water in the gallery is rising — without current,
without sound, without source. It is at your ankles now. It is
perfectly calm, and perfectly warm.*

*You brought lamps, wicks trimmed, oil for six hours. You
need not have. The lamps down here are already lit —
bracketed at civil intervals, burning clean, recently tended,
all the way down into the dark.*

*The birds begin all at once, the whole grey chorus of them —
and stop all at once, mid-phrase, like a door closed on an
orchestra. The light keeps coming. The silence keeps pace with
it.*

*The last candle of the night is drowning in its own wax, and
the window has gone from black to grey. Between the two
lights — the one dying and the one arriving — everyone's
face in the room belongs to a stranger.*

*You count each other in the courtyard, smoke-stained and
shaking: all present. Then you count the shadows the low sun
throws against the wall, long and blue. The counts do not
agree.*

*Dew on the gate, the grass, the cart, the well-rope — the
whole world beaded silver. Except the path from the door to
the road, which is dry, in the shape of many feet standing
still.*

*The sun comes up the way it always does — indifferent,
punctual, gold on the frost. It finds every face at the table
older than it left them last night, and one chair pushed back
that nobody will touch.*