II

Black Santa

The dark had scared Anne when she was younger. She missed the nightlight she’d had as a little girl in this very same house, though to compare that past with this present would be a twisted narrative—in truth, it’s not the same house.

When she was younger, she couldn’t sleep without that little light. She was a restless child who had trouble shutting her tiny brain down at night, which translated into the typical ugly monsters that move freely in the darkness beyond all blanket force fields; and only the magic of a dim yellow light (plugged into the outlet next to her tiny pink bed) could calm her nervous mind enough for sleep. A young lady of fifteen brewed in the digital age; she’d given up that quant, childish thing long ago (long ago for a fifteen year old), but now she needed that low-tech comfort more than ever. She needed it, and all the sweet thoughts that that one electric memory evoked in her, but at least she knew she was safe up here after nightfall, in the attic.

*There stuck down there,*

She reminded herself of this fact to keep her sore dry eyes shut. She curled up into a tighter ball, drew the covers over her head, and did her best to drain off to sleep, hoping some mercy waited there for her.

Her birthday had come and gone by now. The day passed by unnoticed by her until it dawned on her that she must be fifteen. But, her figure was more childlike now than when she was ten; stunted by starvation. She hated her new body: pale lose skin; spaghetti arms and legs; boney hands and feet; her torso, a ribcage with soft dropping nipples where once sprouted firm heavy breast, swelling with promise for a future that Anne knew she’d never have now.

…She thought of them (those *men* down there), circling stupidly like sharks under a glass-bottom boat. Pathetic. Impotent. She imagined them in this way to lessen the fear and reminded herself that by merely staying out of their reach, she was torturing them; condemning them to their own hellish company. They could make their empty threats down there. Impotent in the shadowy vacancy below her—the big dead farmhouse that she was on top of, who’s hot sunset breath still lingered humidly in the attic rafters around her; *her home!,* since she was a baby; all her short life. Those *men* could do what they wanted with that hollow space bellow her. Hollow now because home was never just the building or the objects cluttering it—something she learned too late. …She wouldn’t listen anymore. She wouldn’t care. They could keep the dark and the empty. They could stomp, like rich spoiled toddlers in need of a poor mother’s back-hand. They could pace the second floor hall, just under her make-shift bed of cardboard (Christmas ornament boxes, over a sheet of plywood that spanned the attic’s exposed floor-joists), and guard her one escape route. One by one, they could cruelly knock her mother’s knick-knacks off the kitchen shelves on the ground level, killing one warm memory at a time; soiling Anne’s favorite room by their mere vile presence within it. All in the craven hopes of hearing her sobs bled down from the ceiling—she wouldn’t entertain them; she wouldn’t cry for them anymore.

Ignored, they could do same as they did every night down there. They could curse and murmur. They could tantrum, as they often did—shrieking, shouting crude incoherent vulgarities and becoming violent tornados that would thankfully drain away, soon after starting, into long stretches of blessed silence sometimes as long as an hour before starting up all over again. She knew that they couldn’t work up enough organized strength to reach up, draw down the ceiling hatch, and unfold the attic stairs. And, she knew by now that their filthy spirits could not float.

Lucid now that her life-force was near its limit, she worried, *Maybe* *he won’t save me?* Where was her hero; her shining knight Jesus? …*Maybe he doesn’t care?* Death didn’t scare her so much anymore—there was more than just that to worry about.

…A heavy thud! Followed by a loud, rolling chain-reaction calamity downstairs shook the house!

She opened her eyes and lifted her sore head to look at the attic stairs (folded up into the attic with her) and the trapdoor’s white drawstring, which (long and twisted) glowed like a pale lifeless worm in the diffused moonlight that seeped in through the roof’s ridge-vents, reassuring herself that nothing was coming. …She shivered within her loose skin, knowing what had fallen by it location, its weight, and its racket—shattering glass, popping springs and gears, and bells, tumbling across the hardwood at the farm home’s entrance hall. It was the antique grandfather clock that had towered by the front door for all her short life, and it was very, very heavy.

Her eyes tried to hold focus on the loosely coiled drawstring as her head became heavier. Anne had been careful to pull up every bit of the draw-string, leaving just the knotted bud of the rope, flush to the high hallway ceiling under her. It hadn’t moved and it wasn’t going to. Her dad needed a four foot ladder to reach the attic door—*they* couldn’t float and the ladder was all the way down in the basement, buried in a storage closet.

…Her neck was too weak to go on holding up her head, so she gave up her guard and rolled onto her back. She tried lying flat and stretching out, but her stomach was stabbed with needles of hunger pain, so she rolled back on her side and curled up into a little boney ball again, pulling the covers over her head. After holding back for almost week she whimpered pathetically into her pillow; trying to muffle her misery from the ever listening ears bellow.

Downstairs: the sound of a big man laughing in the hall, under the attic door—all just a silly game for an evil man.

What pathetic creatures these demons are? She refused to entertain them anymore.

*Where is everyone*, she wondered, fantasizing about a chivalrous rescuer to sweep in and save her, or at least a nosey neighbor checking in. Prince Charming; a hopeful fantasy or two could still be believed in. *…Maybe he’s dead? Maybe everyone’s dead except for me?* That’s a thought worthy of tears, but those murderers; those worthless raping bastards down there—they’d hear her mourning and assume that pain was for them and then cum all over themselves. She wasn’t their plastic wife; their furry callused hands! She was the agent of their demise and they were in hell because of her.

*Burn! Burn you assholes!*

…But even though she was above them (after all this time), she was in hell too and true heaven was becoming her last glimmer of salvation.

In the hall, below the door, a big man’s voice boomed, “Get down here slut!” And other lesser male voices giggling insults throughout the house, “Cunt …whore …little piggy,” etc.; boring vulgarities upon boring vulgarities.

The girl shuddered and her gut twisted from the stress of persistent fright. She convulsed while gagged and choked on the slow stream of hot yellow vomit, trickling out the side of her mouth and onto her box mattress.

She’d never escape! She had tried for more than a week, but she couldn’t escape them. The wide open country space around her home had seemed freeing in the past, but now that land might as well be prison walls—there was no place she could walk or run to and avoid a night stuck in a tree with evil black figures popping in and out of existence to pace the earth beneath her; or a night spent in another murder-house’s attic. She knew they’d never stop following her, and they’d get her if she made a mistake while traveling. They’d have already gotten her if it weren’t for the fact that they were stuck to the ground by a force more powerful than ordinary gravity. She never found another living soul out there so she stayed near her farmhouse, where she felt sure that she had a safe hiding place. She scavenged herself up a bare existence until around two weeks ago, when all the little food left in and around the house had run out or rotted away—since then, she’d been starving, sustained only by well-water and the ridiculous notion that some living someone, somewhere was coming to rescue her just before it was too late.

Anne’s vomiting ceased. Finally she was able to breathe again and recover from her body’s long painful fit. …She began crying again.

Predictably, the men confined for eternity to the floors below her, laughed.

*Why me?* …She remembered her original sin and retracted her whinny question. *They can’t float*, she assured herself. …*They can’t float*, she told herself to relax. …They’re stuck. But she worried as she fainted off into what felt like a one-way slumber, *When I die, will I sink?*