The Devil took Dianna

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By James Marx

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It was the same year as the year of the cats and the spiders. When we had to kill the kittens. It was a very strange time.

The house was infested with spiders. Big, black and hairy; they were all over and we couldn't get rid of them. They hid away during the day and at night when we were sleeping they came out and walked around. It was terrifying going to bed when you knew that you would wake up in the middle of the night with them crawling over you.

You would try and put sleep off as much as possible, reading with the light on; making much noise in an attempt to keep them away. You would feel their presence just beyond where the light reached; you could feel their eyes on you, waiting for the darkness to come crawling out of their holes, their feet making a slight scratching noise on the floor. A slight tip-tap as they were running closer; intruding into your dreams and causing countless nightmares. Except this time it was real.

You would slowly nod off and eventually you would give up and switch off the light, knowing that if you did that they would know and wait for you to fall asleep before coming closer. But keeping the light on was so much worse because if you woke up with them crawling on your breast; it was better to not see, just feel.

It was better to scream in the dark than in the light. Looking into their eyes left you cold and you were frozen and couldn't breathe or speak or move. If you woke up at night and it was dark you couldn't see and it was easier to get out of bed, not knowing what you stepped on.

It was strange that in the mornings there were no bodies. No proof of the ones that you threw off yourself in the night, flinging them with a dull thud against the wall; and there was no proof of the ones that you killed under your feet. The warm and sticky feeling in the night was just a memory, hidden in the dreams and darkness. And in the morning you didn't know whether it was true or not.

But we knew, for she had experienced it as well. We knew that they were there. We could feel their presence in the dark and during the day. We could hear them on the edge of reason, speaking and talking in their chattering, bristly voices, waiting, waiting. We could hear them in the dark crannies and corners. We knew they were there.

Twice we called the exterminator, but they couldn't be found or killed. We moved everything out and around, looking for them but they were too clever and evaded us. They couldn't be found or chased or teased out. They couldn't be killed with gas or poison. We could find no way to get rid of them and dreaded the evenings and the dark nights with their presences and slowly, sickening creeping.

When the experts couldn't find anything or kill them or help us in any way, that is when we knew what we had to do. We had to kill the kittens.

I do not remember how many there were, but we discussed it and decided that it would be for the best and killing them would be the only way to get rid of the spiders. We did not have to spill any

blood, but if we got rid of the kittens, the spiders would disappear; they would vanish with the last clod being put into the grave, covering our deeds of cowardice and kindness.

The kittens were not any kind of wide-eyed balls of fluff. They were mangy and evil with too-red tongues setting of too-long fangs. They hung around the house with their foul-smelling breath and intimidated us during the day. In the bright hours of the sun they carried the work of the spiders during the night further. They would claw your ankles with their blackened nails and bite your fingers. They mewled for food but were not satisfied until they had drawn your blood.

That is how we knew that killing them would be our solution to the horrors of the night. If we removed half of the evil ones the rest would leave as they could not be sustained during the day and their dark presence would leave us to rest quietly at night. We would be able to get some sleep at last and regain our equilibrium. We would be able to face the world again.

We finally decided to go ahead and quietly dug the graves. More than twenty in all, spread over the garden and very deep to prevent them from coming back to bother us at night. We did it with much talk about gardening and mulching to prevent them from finding out, but they looked at the graves and knew what we were up to. They almost expected it.

We drew lots to see who would do the dastardly deed. I was chosen as the shameless executioner.

That night we were surprised to find that the spiders did come out, but did not come closer to the beds. They hung beyond the shadows and when the lights were switched off they stayed right there, almost as if in a swoon and did not come near us. They were waiting too.

The next morning when we met we knew that we were doing the right thing and that we had to go through with it or face terrible consequences. We got ready to go outside and feed the kittens, to try and catch them and fool them into security. We were wrong.

They were waiting for us, bright-eyed and fluffy. Cute and cuddly as they had never been. Looking up at us in silent and trusting anticipation, purring and flicking their tails.

I leant down and picked up the first one by the neck. He looked at me innocently and I grasped his neck tighter while the rest looked on. His eyes began to bulge and he stuck out his tongue in discomfort, silently purring while I was suffocating him, strangling him to death. At last when his eyes clouded over and his heart stopped beating, the last breath was expelled.

I dropped the limp and listless body from my grasp only to pick up the next, while the rest of them moved forward to fill the gap. I did not pause or stop once until it was all finished and done. The bright and open eyes mesmerising me into a deadly trance where I stooped to take and grasp and throttle and leave another small bundle of fluff on the growing pile. The rest of them moving forward to fill the gap.

I remember that much and standing at a row of small and deep graves with a row of identical little mounds of fresh earth and a shovel in my hands. I put it away and washed my hands before going to bed.

I did not want to soil the clean white sheets. The white of purity and peace we knew we would have that night.

I remember lying in bed and recalling the row of earthly mounds with the crimson sky fading to purple and the blood red sun setting in the distance. I remember the immense sense of peace and calm that descended; knowing that at last it was done and our nights of torment would end. That night there were no sounds and no tip-tap walking in the dark. There were no glowing pinpoints beyond the shadows and we slept soundly and deep. Thoroughly resting for the first time in a number of years and months, at last as it was intended. We could not recall the next day morning how soundly we slept, or the last time we managed to sleep as well as that first night. We talked about it and the silence and the sleep we slept, as dead as the kittens under their mounds.

Our eyes strayed in that direction and we looked away when we saw them. We did not talk about it, but rather the peace and silence we felt and the night ahead of more of the same. We spent the morning in reminisce of the night past and the afternoon in hope and anticipation of another night of silence and rest. Rest without the fear of waking up with a bristly body crawling over your naked skin. Rest and nights of silent, blissful blackness.

When night finally came and the sun descended, making long shadows of the little mounds in the garden, and we crawled onto the pure white sheets to rest our weary heads, we felt no fear. We were glad and did not take our time as before to stay awake and easily switched off the lights to bring the dark and the sleep and we were at peace.

A peace that we had not known for a long time, much longer than we could remember. And welcome was the silence and the dark. It was very dark that night, without the glint of little eyes in the shadows and we were glad and excited at another night of rest and silence.

When I woke up it was still dark, but with an orange glow around the curtain edges. And I lay in the silence, waiting to see the sky brighten and the edges of the curtain lighten to signify the day is coming. I lay there in quiet repose and thought about the night of peace and rest and saw the clock.

It was then I realised that the dawn was still far away and that there was no reason for the orange glow. Without switching the light on I climbed out of bed, steeling myself for the warm, wet crunch underfoot and was once again surprised by its absence.

I pulled away the curtain and saw the reason for the little soft crackling and whispering sound I have been hearing at the edge of silence all the time since I awoke. The sky was aflame with an orange glow, just beyond the visible rooftops and further away in the town. The church tower was a sentinel against the yellow flicker and smoke rising beyond it.

And I heard the soft, low sound of screams. Agony and fear mixed with the crackle of flames. I became afraid and knew that there was something wrong.

Running out of the room I saw that the front door was open already and I realized that I awoke alone. When I reached the porch I saw her silhouetted against the glow on the edge of the garden and I froze.

In the foreground was the garden and the little mounds were no longer there. Instead was a row of identical, empty graves.

I ran to reach her but when I walked onto the street she was no longer there and I only heard my footsteps on the quiet street. There was no other sound other than the crackle of the flames and the low wind of the heat, rising into the air and adding its moan to the screams already there.

I stood frozen and looked at the scene in front of me. The spire of the church tower black against the red and the rooftops highlighted with bands of yellow flame and wisps of smoke. Rising up and disappearing into the cloudless sky, with little pinpricks where the stars added their glow.

I could not move or breathe and stood there rooted and more afraid than I had ever been. I wanted to rush around and look to see where she had gone, but could not move.

Gradually I became aware of someone behind me, but I knew it was not she. I could feel hot breath and smelled sulphur and death. I knew that I should look around, but could not.

My legs started moving and I walked along the quiet street, looking forward and holding my head straight, as if in a clamp. I looked toward the black outlines of the houses and the orange-yellow glow beyond. I walked along and heard the clip-clop of hooves behind me, together with my barefoot steps. In fearful staccato tandem.

I still smelled the sulphur and heard the breath and knew what was behind me was not of this mortal earth.

I looked down and saw a crimson ribbon that I knew belonged to her. I stopped but did not dare to pick it up and instead looked at the fire again.

It seemed the whole town was aflame and there was nothing we could do to save it. The screams were louder and I could hear that they were not of anguish of lost homes and property, but personal pain.

I heard a soft sound behind me and the breathing became louder, with the smell of sulphur even stronger. I felt a warmth and evil intention transmitted at the same time as I felt a hand upon my elbow. I froze. Looking down I saw a blood red claw with polished ivory nails scarcely human and the flames flickering along them, reflected in a ghastly red hue.

With a rough movement I was turned around and beheld the most hideous visage any man has ever seen. Fangs between crimson lips and horns carving viciously to the sky. Leather-like breast and a look of pure hatred. He looked me in the eyes and I was sure I would not be able to tell this tale.

A voice dripping with venom, unlike any I ever heard. “One is enough for now.”

The power of it threw me to the ground and I lay there as the sky became lighter and the crackling grew stronger.

I looked at the brightening sky and knew that dawn had come. Unsure of myself or what I had experienced, I got out of bed and walked to the bedroom door. Her side of the bed was empty and the front door was open.

In fear and hope I walked outside and saw the row of empty graves, beckoning me to take a closer look.

I hugged myself and felt a strange scab on my upper arm. Looking down I saw a row of four identical burn marks with a single corresponding partner on the other side.

I knew that I was not going to sleep peacefully that night, or ever again.