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Demon Jar

By Stephen Mark Rainey

A lengthening shadow on the floor drew Bob Cooper's eyes away from his desktop computer screen, and he caught a faint whiff of jasmine soap as he turned to regard his twelve-year-old daughter.

"What is it, Connie?"

Her narrow, violet-blue eyes gleamed in the dark space beyond the glow of his desk lamp. "The closet upstairs was talking to me."

Something popped in his right eardrum, and a painful, high-pitched shriek drilled through his auditory canal before diminishing to a shrill but tolerable drone. "Upstairs?"

"The upstairs bathroom closet. It was talking."

"What were you doing upstairs?"

"Nothing."

"You're not supposed to go up there, especially by yourself." His mouth felt as if it were lined with sandpaper. "It's dark and it's dangerous."

"It's not dangerous."

"Yes. It is. Do not go up there."

"Sorry, Dad."

"So what did the closet say?"

"Hard to understand. It sounded funny."

"Funny?"

"Like Grandma when she's drinking."

He studied her bright eyes, trying to determine whether she was sincere or playing some adolescent mind game. Over the past year, she had become adept at the latter, and he wasn't about to encourage her. "Just don't go up there."

“Yes, Dad.” She turned for the door, but paused before leaving. “It said ‘minus fog.’”

“‘Minus fog?’”

“Yes.”

He sighed, trying to remember whether he had ever been such an inscrutable child. Connie disappeared down the hall, and he turned his eyes back to the monitor, half his mind on the sorry state of his finances, the other on the faint but persistent steam whistle in his ears, which meant his blood pressure had gone through the roof.

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The light on the third floor came from an exposed 60-watt bulb with a pull-chain. The attic spanned the length and breadth of the aging Tudor, the open space divided by a few drywall partitions Cooper had erected, back when he had entertained the notion of turning the floor into a usable office and living area. As things stood, the bathroom, in the northernmost corner, was the only enclosed, functional room.

The bathroom had its own light, though when he flicked it on, the white fluorescent produced only a sickly glow. Within it, he saw a stack of boxes teetering in one corner, several filthy cobwebs dangling from the fixtures, and a thick layer of dust covering every surface. On the floor, a set of small footprints clearly revealed Connie’s path to the closet. In the mirror above the sink, his reflection skulked behind a gray veil, his features barely discernible.

It didn’t seem so long ago that he had set to work with the idea of creating his own personal sanctuary, but it had been at least ten years. Robin had been gone for six, and in that time, he had scarcely set foot up here, having seen little further need for it.

He followed the footprints and stopped in front of the closet, listening to the silence and the occasional creaks and pops from the house’s old depths. He had not planned to come up here, but something about Connie’s story had lured him. He reached for the knob and tugged open the closet door, certain there would be nothing to see, yet feeling a cold finger of apprehension at the back of his neck.

He saw the jar immediately, even though it hid behind several ancient bottles of shampoo, lotion, and aftershave. It was large, filled with God knew how many colorful balls of handmade soap that Robin had collected all those years ago. He didn’t remember stowing the thing up here; perhaps she had—back when she was healthy, before the cancer had ruined her body. Whatever he remembered or didn’t, he was quite certain that, the last time he had seen the jar, the soap inside had not melted into a lumpy, colorful mass that resembled a face pressed against the glass.

Not just a face. A hideous witch’s face, with gaping holes for eyes and a wide, crooked mouth that leered at him with so much malice that he staggered backward in surprise.

When his wits recovered, he leaned forward to study the strange image, taking in its perfectly awful contours; its deep eye sockets; its vile, gaping mouth. The damned

thing was fascinating. Completely random, yet so deliberate, its features infused with a distinctive, dreadful personality. For a moment, he wondered if Connie might have somehow sculpted it, but then he thought, no, clearly, the soap balls had simply melted and taken on the odd form as they settled in the jar.

Something flashed in the darkness, and he realized it had come from one of the face's hollow eyes. Peering in deeper, he saw, half-buried in the waxy soap, a small, pearl-like sphere, its polished surface gleaming in the weak fluorescent light. Surely it wasn't a real pearl, he thought; more likely some bit of costume jewelry Robin had once dropped inside. He started to reach for the jar to retrieve the pearl, but found himself strangely repulsed by the idea of touching the grotesque mass inside.

Then came a whisper. A low, garbled, unintelligible voice. Somewhere inside the room with him.

His face clenched in a bewildered frown, for he could not have heard what he thought he heard. He stood there, a puzzled statue, anticipating something further. But the expectant silence only lingered, and after a time, his legs began to cramp.

With each passing second, the more the ghostly "voice" became a misperception. Maybe conditions up here amplified sounds from elsewhere: the sound of the television or noise from the street. That must have been what Connie had heard.

He was about to shut the closet door when another cold shimmer caught his eye. Learning forward again, he now saw a pearl inside *each* of the jar-face's eye sockets. As he watched, the pupil-like spheres rolled slowly upward and focused on him with what seemed the very definition of malevolence.

What?

His lungs frozen solid, he slammed the closet door, turned around, and made his way back to the main floor, picking his steps carefully to avoid falling on the narrow, treacherous stairs. Then he went into his den, closed the door, and dropped to his knees, where his lungs went into spasms, and his teeth clenched together so tightly that one of his fillings popped out.

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Connie sat across from him at the dinner table, picking at her food. "You don't look so good, Dad," she said. "Whatever it was, I didn't do it."

He offered her a weak chuckle, feeling in his nerves the paleness of his face. "No, you didn't do anything. I'm just tired. Having a hard time working out the budget."

"Thought maybe you'd heard something," she said, an enigmatic gleam in her eye.

Ordinarily, he might have warned her against mouthing off to him, but he let the remark pass, the subject too unnerving.

After recovering from his near-panic, he had gone back upstairs, intending to throw out the soap jar, aware that he had fallen victim a second time to some trick of his senses. Foolish, he knew, but he could not shake the dark feeling the thing gave him. This

time when he gazed at the horrid face, he saw only a grotesque mound of melted soap and a pair of cheap, artificial pearls. No unusual whispers, no menacing stares from inside the jar.

Yet, inside the closet, the thing remained.

His eyes darted to Connie's. "Have you done your homework?"

"Yes, Dad." She gave him a look that bordered on the contemptuous.

He looked down at his dinner plate, at the unappetizing remains of his meat loaf. Tomorrow, he would have to call a dentist about his filling. Another bill he couldn't afford.

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Are we poor?"

He shook his head. "Not poor. Just a little behind."

Her eyes delved inward for a time before returning to his. "Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Did Mom love us?"

"Of course she did."

Connie rubbed her forehead as if contemplating deep things, just the way her mother used to. Robin had died when Connie was six. "I miss Mom."

"Oh, honey. How well do you remember her?"

"Very well," she said, smiling a little. "She used to rock me in the rocking chair in my room. I liked that."

"I know you did."

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Did she love you?"

"Well, sure she did."

Connie's eyes narrowed, piercing his the way Robin's had when she was frustrated with him. "Why?"

"What do you mean why? We loved each other." Her words stung Cooper's heart. "It's why we got married."

"Okay."

"Don't look so downhearted."

She shook her head and stared at him for a while. To his shame, he could not meet her gaze, so he turned his eyes back to the half-eaten food on his plate.

"Minus fog," Connie said.

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Cooper spent the next morning cleaning the upstairs bathroom. Dusting. Scrubbing. Polishing the mirror. Putting in fresh towels and toilet paper.

He was going make use of the bathroom, no matter what. Maybe he would even

continue the work he had begun all those years ago and make the attic a habitable, even pleasant place to spend his time.

And the soap jar would stay.

He called his dentist, but it would be a week before he could get an appointment. At noon, he logged into work, which was enrolling his insurance company's sickest clients in various disease management programs. It wasn't a bad job, but it brought in barely enough to support the two of them, and since some of his key investments had fallen through, things just kept getting tougher. Keeping anything akin to hope alive was toughest of all.

At nine, when he logged out, he went straight upstairs and looked into the bathroom closet. The soap jar was there, as was the face, its gaze hot and wicked. At least there were no whispers, no sentient rolling eyes. He knew the little twinge of fear was irrational, and conquering it might be all he needed to revive some of his old confidence, which had taken its leave somewhere between Robin's death and his bank account's meltdown.

Earlier, he had removed a half dozen boxes of old clothes and knick-knacks from the bathtub, and now it beckoned him to use it. Yes, he thought; a long hot shower, here in the sanctuary he had long desired. It would relax his taut muscles and relieve the tension that threatened to rupture his brain. Connie was buried in homework and had no reason to come looking for him. So why the hell not?

He stripped off his clothes and turned on the water—which huffed and chugged a few times before coming out of the overhead nozzle in a steady stream, frigid cold at first, warming only after a long couple of minutes. He had placed a fresh bar of soap in the dish, but for a wild second, he envisioned his hands reaching into the jar, tearing apart the demon face, and using its ruined flesh to lather his body. The notion departed quickly, however, and when he stepped into the tub, he pulled the shower curtain tight so there would be no chance of glimpsing the thing's villainous eyes.

The water felt good, nearly scalding now, the torrent washing away his burdens. He wished the soap and shampoo could cleanse the wounds in his soul as well. After all these years, Robin's absence only ached more keenly inside him. She had been the anchor in his life, a guiding presence that kept him focused on what was best for his family.

A cool draft brushed his legs, and he perceived that the shower curtain had fluttered. He thrust his face into the hot stream to wash the suds from his eyes, and when he opened them, his heart lurched and something again popped in his skull, becoming that terrible, shrill tone that bored into his eardrums like an endless sliver of glass. His voice failed him.

Connie's violet eyes were peering at him around the edge of the shower curtain, her expression as dull as a sleepwalker's. He reflexively swiveled to keep from exposing himself to her, but she seemed unaware of what she was doing.

Why? He hadn't given her anything.

She tugged open the shower curtain and now he saw that one of her arms cradled the demon jar, and the face inside was alive, more alive than his daughter's, and its pearl-hard eyes gleamed at him the way Robin's eyes had gleamed when she was angry.

Taking the jar in both hands, Connie raised it above her head, and when Cooper realized what she was about to do, his voice returned, but only briefly.

“Connie, don't...”

When it struck the tub's porcelain floor, the jar exploded, sending glass fragments into his legs. He staggered backward, his weight driving a glass dagger deep into his heel, and then he felt himself falling, falling into a bed of sparkling shards.

He saw blood painting the sides of the tub before he felt anything. But even as the pain began to register, his nerves went icy numb when he saw the demon face from the jar inching *up* the side of the tub, its eyes too bright, its gaping mouth working back and forth as if to form words.

When the voice came forth, it was as cruel and jagged as the glass embedded in his flesh, and it sounded like his dead wife's voice. “Never again.”

His eyes rolled toward Connie's, and now he saw awareness in them, a full recollection of all he had done.

No. She should not remember him bringing her up here. The dose of GHB would have shut down her receptors. At the time, her mind was fogged.

Mind...was...fogged.

“Minus fog.”

He had never intended to harm her. Only because he missed Robin so, and Connie was too much like her. It had made him crazy. Sick crazy.

Connie reached into the tub, and when she drew back her hand, he saw in it a long, glittering spear. Her violet eyes brightened, and she said in a voice like Robin's, “Now I'm going to touch you.”

He turned his eyes to the waxy face that was inching along the porcelain toward him. Its pearl eyes sparkled like the glass in the tub, but the mouth, like his, never spoke again.

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