

Demons Build

a

House

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“The more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze ghosts.”

--Italo Calvino

“The American Standard:”

From cicadas’ schmoozing on toasty summer days to the
Hot breezes that would melt upon your skin, a fitted screen
And its thick glass door separated primal heat and the American Standard.

Wrinkled, brittle, and starchy, a limey olefin, with throw
Pillows to match, eyed the television, plum tuckered out forever. A
Torchiere saluted limply. It gave sighs through pearly opaque, mingling
With the crystal sun to create charming opalescence. The chilly swoosh
Sprouted all around. A vicious weed.

Drowsy heartleaves, probably too old to recall Watergate, reclined
In the corner. They arched toward the alabaster
Walls, across the amber table and loosely stretched for a pure gleam
From the day’s supple white sun. The webby hearts gamboled every so often when the brass
Geysers would sputter on, sending more of that fusty cold. Cold that would quench the room and
Reassure each passing Jap that, “yes, you are
Like Us.”

The frigid blast, with its white fingers, swept through the musty
Curtains to draw in the gossamer. Illuming daisy dust as it floated toward
Furrowed carpet until it powdered its violet complexion; the undesirable
Yellow disappeared, but it
Never truly left.

The American Standard has always sputtered.

On and off. On and off.

It was cold, like this, in the Tarheel Summer. And balmy in our
Carolina Winter. But regardless, of climate, the American Standard’s breath would sigh and moan.
Heave and holler. It never forgot to ask us—
No. It never
forgot to remind us:

“You are still a Jap.”

“Vegan’s Among Man”

After saying the opening blessing each Apostle looks towards the other...

“Is this bread
Vegan?”

They scrutinize Jesus’ holy meal with the grace and pretentiousness that only comes with “The Movement.”

“Is it polite to ask for the nutrition facts to this?” “Oh God please tell me that wasn’t buttered—Sorry God” “Oh it’s so appetizing, but I swore to bite an apple instead.” “I can’t tell Jesus I’m a Vegan, it’s not kosher.”

And all the while, the Messiah remains at the center, unaware that his disciples have converted to good living. He basks in hope they will remember this as their last meal, bumbling off hearty scripture he memorized in his free time

“yeah, right from the mouth of God, I swear it; can you pass the milk and honey?”

the twelve festoon his plate with their own garnish. Adding to his glorious golden, (daresay Couture?) pitcher he stole from that blind Jewess in the market.

They’re not into animal exploitation.

They don’t want that saturated fat anymore.

Mary Magdalene leans to answer Judas’ anxious query that “yes, that’s tofu NOT fish—but don’t tell J—he still thinks it’s real;” retreating back next to Jesus. She knows she must be seen next to the holy lord.

—*Keeping up
appearances—*

The meal of all meals, the Last Supper, with all these apprehensive glares and accusatory gawking, could it all have been because no one wanted to eat the meat? Andrew’s got his hands up like he about to spit some sick rhymes or a

“no no, thanks Messy but
I don’t want any of that lamb tonight”

And why is Philip all hunched over like Quasimodo?

He is in that all too familiar
situation mid-chew when the cook says

“Yea, I put extra
butter in that tonight, can you taste it?”

The challenge of discretely
Spitting up that chewed food into little paper napkins but

“Where are the napkins?”

Chirps brave Judas. Jesus chortles, wiping lardy
Fat from his lips,

“Dear
Judas! Napkins
won’t be invented for a lifetime! Eat up, be merry, and waste not a morsel.”

“The Twelfth of January was a Sunday”

The Twelfth of January was a Sunday and
I was eating eggs and bacon and this was when I wasn’t a vegetarian and
there was no fruit on my plate except for a small pile of strawberries
and my eggs were aureolin and after a week of tender brattle
I couldn’t say a thing.
Breathe.
I could only eat and
my plate was egg-white and
his hands were so ginger with the coffee that matched his silken almond eyes
and I hear eyes are the windows to the soul so was
staring into them such a rude thing to do.

Breathe.

Eating breakfast, noshing dinner,
gorging myself at lunch, the kaleidoscopic comestibles never
sated my hunger, you – the delicate aphrodisiac I craved
with all my life. How had our hearts
not touched more than a week ago?

Breathe.

He drank a lot of coffee to keep noise in the air and I think
our utensils had a more fulfilling conversation than we did in that morning.

Breathe.

And with the chink of forks and the scrapping of
spoons ceasing for but a second’s sigh, I knew the moment crept
shakily forward saying unsurely

“This is me.

This is what I have to offer.

Take me.”

I tried to say it really clearly because it would
be awkward if he didn’t hear me the first time but just extend a little
forward and wait for him to look or don’t wait forever

“May I kiss you?”

Breathe now.

“A Grandson’s Confession”

The steaks were dripped with golden
butter and the rice so white they looked like
shattered pearls. There were plates of every hue and “where are the napkins?”
“We seem to be fresh out” yelled whoever needed the last
one earlier that day. It was a family communion.

Untouched by time.

Dinners always ended, no matter how long I felt
the sun would wrestle the moon to give Him a moments twinkling. The rays, cresting, would
shimmer onto the food, a prize. We had limped through another
week. Grandpa was eating
again, and there was life oh!-speckled bird
eggs of life! Hatching inside his pupils.

Hatchlings only reminded me that Grandpa was still
there. Underneath folded layers
and layers
of rotting parchment, ink splattered from an unforgiving
sun. His hair, wisper than spider's webs, clung limply. A rotting
plant, unable to stand you are confined to your silver, platinum wheelchair.
There is life. "Snuff it out."

Didn't I pray to the Almighty once that torment should end?
My dear Grandpa's life, I wanted to expend it
terribly. Wither it away--was it murder? Did I murder
him with my "Our Father's" and "Hail Mary's" oh, one can only regret.
God will know all.

This "man" across the table far down to my
left has a puttied mind. Brain smashed together.
A masheried heap of dung. His mouth lolled to a side.
He is fed by a spoon, and it can't be my favorite anymore.

Twilight is busy with its brush and pan, sweeping
away sundry dirt. But this gilded glow can still bubble
into our meal. The sun-room--
and I find it hard to believe that you're eating off that plate.

Stop chewing.

Stop

breathing.

I know you're fighting so hard, but look at my father,

Your son who is still in

love with you. Let go for him. Before he stickingly reaches too far at his hopes you will recover.

I have prayed and I have seen you, your straggle

to the end long enough. Can't you see,

Grandpa, with your little birds gasping for breath that you are causing pain here?

You'll die and my father's laughter
will change deep groans.

You'll die and my mother's hands, so steady now as she feeds you,
will shake and wring grief and despair, a magnitude deeper because she fed you
less than a month before.

You'll die and my furrowed brow and glazed eyes will melt into
blissful relief.

You make death fester.

Bubble, and the lesion of

your tragedy seeps moist puss.

*Our Father, O, my God, I am heartily
sorry for having offended you, Who Art in Heaven. I detest
all my sins because hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come,
thy, my God, who are all-good and deserving of all of my love, will be done,
on Earth as it is in heaven*

“Gravy Fat”

“They say a Christmas Dinner is perfect if the last bite is taken right when the smell of Santa’s cookies touches your nose,” muttered Grammy, not once loosening her steady rhythm as she stirred the savory gravy. Celia’s eyes grew goose egg with the news.

Ideas flooded her pee-wee brain: *I could sit closest to the oven to smell the cookies first and then yell “STOP EATING;” or I could blow a fan on the cookies and stop it once the last person is taking their bite or everyone could only be allowed fifty bites and when we get to 45 I will turn the fan off* and, like the sizzling crackles of one of the several pans in front of Grammy, her ideas kept popping. Her determination to make this the best Christmas was unbreakable. It was stronger than making Easter perfect with dyed polka-dot eggs; it was stronger than her resolve at the last Thanksgiving. She balled her fists cringing at the memory of Mommy’s spankings. Celia had gone out of her way to learn Turkey-Calls and, without telling anyone, biked to the nearby forest to get a real turkey for dinner. It only took the police four hours to find Celia. Celia had hidden inside a shrub waiting for the Police to leave; she thought they were hunting turkey too, but once she realized they were looking for her, not the bird, did she show herself.

“What else makes a good Christmas dinner, Grammy?” Celia sat Indian-style on her cooking stool. She eyed the comestibles in preparation critically. *This has to be the best Christmas ever.*

Grammy, never missing a beat on the gravy, stood eyeing the food too. “Well, I would say some fun conversation always elevates a meal to perfection. Political discussions but,” she waved her wrinkled hand towards Celia, “only to the point of lightheartedness. One must be wary about politics.”

“Yes. Of course. Politics.” She agreed with Grammy. “Once Bobby and my teacher fought about the stalk market.”

“Yes, darling,” Grammy chuckled, “that stalk market sure can...follow you around.”

Celia didn't know what was so funny, but she took her cue to leave. Grammy had extended for the telephone to call Daddy. *She must have forgotten to tell him an ingredient.* She bit her nails and said an Our Father, hoping Daddy hadn't left Kroger yet. Passing the front door, the little girl peered out the window. It was four in the afternoon. The sky was liquid tangerine with splotches of purple and violet to the East. She breathed a heavy sigh and condensation appeared. She knew it was called condensation too because her father always told her it was. Whenever he had an icy drink and it looked like the glass was sweating, “that's condensation, honey,” or whenever a window looked like it was blushing, “that's condensation, honey.” And to Celia, it didn't look half as much like sweating or blushing as it did crying.

Condensation on windows was like her Mommy crying. Celia would never tell anyone this, but sometimes, late at night, Celia would wake from her sleep to find both her parents gone from the bed. It wasn't a surprise to not see Daddy, he had been sleeping with Mommy and her less and less recently, but finding Mommy gone was strange. Mommy never stirred in the night and usually slept all the night through. But the past month had been different. And Celia, after the first week of this, always knew where Mommy went. Through a small crack in the bathroom door, Celia could look in to find Mommy staring into the mirror, each night of her disappearance, Mommy stared long and hard at herself. Her brow was furrowed and her eyes crimson with exhaustion. Well, Celia first thought it was exhaustion, but she began to discover that Mommy had gone in to cry. “*To cry about what?*” Celia always wondered, but she never figured it out. All Celia knew was that she didn't like when mommy cried, and this is why she liked to draw on the condensation, whenever she came across it. So that maybe, just maybe, this “fixing” could be done in real life too. She took her little pointer finger, not even the length of a crayon yet and scribbled a little smiley face. And at this she smiled. And at this she knew that she was happy. She bounded up her carpeted stairs, and reached the second floor. Her pee-wee heart was going *papit papit papit* from her climb.

She thought it would be funny to pretend to be dying and so she made an entrance to Mommy's room like so. She heaved her body into the room, crawling as slowly and tensely as she could. She thought sweaty thoughts and with heavy breathing dragged herself into Mommy's bathroom. "Mommy. I..am...dying..." she weezed.

And, sure enough, Mommy was there, looking at herself in the mirror as she put on sparkly earrings. Her red lips clashed charmingly with her flashing teeth. "Oh sweetie, what was it this time? Ebola?"

Celia didn't know what Ebola was, but she knew that the number one rule to having fun, according to her teacher Ms. Norma, was to "agree with any idea suggested." She let out a ghastly "yesssss" making a little hissing noise, almost like the deflation of a withering balloon. But not quite, because humans are not balloons. She lay on the bathroom rug, fully aware of the growing wetness on her back, but, as Ms. Norma says, she had to fully "commit or risk losing the audience's interest."

Mommy quickly looped the jewelry through her lobes and picked up a nearby bath towel. "Oh my, Celia. Well, there just really isn't much we can do about that," she walked to Celia's side, "I guess," she draped the cloth over Celia's pee-wee body, "we'll need to arrange the funeral."

And Celia knew what was about to happen. She smiled a pee-wee grin and felt her mother's long fingers tickle her body. Both of their hearts went *papit papit papit*. "I love you, Mommy." The tickling stopped only long enough to be replaced by the warm embrace of her mother's soft hands.

Mommy scooped Celia from the floor and carried her to the bed. "Merry Christmas, Celia. Take a little nap, okay?"

"Want to sleep with me, Mama? You look tired."

Skinny laughter, "Why would you say that, Peach? I'm wide awake!"

“Your eyes, Mama. They’re all red like Sleepy’s.” Celia did not ever want to mention Mommy crying late at night.

Mommy played with Celia’s bangs and found interest in the bed-spread. “Mommy’s just...just...Celia, do you enjoy presents?”

Celia’s drowsiness increased, “Yes, Mama. I love presents.”

And Mommy left.



The bed felt softer than usual, like a pillow that had been sat on by a fat man. It was squishy and the blankets were like wrappers for expensive candies and as Celia’s fragile hands fumbled in the wrappers she felt a steel rectangle. She grabbed and pulled to find Daddy’s Phone. A message gleamed from its screen from “ANGELA.” It read...

“I got the new KY for us...can’t wait to try.”

Celia read it over again trying to understand. Was there a new Kentucky? Had a new state been added? Celia always made sure to watch CNN with Grammy in the evenings, surely she would have known something so important. This new puzzle stroked her mind and she drifted to sleep.

And she danced into dreams and she dreamt she was in her dinner chair surrounded by Mommy, Daddy, and Grammy and they were all holding hands too and a prayer was being said. But who was saying it? Celia was! She said that God was great and God was good and all the things she needed to say before dinner, taught by Father Paul and she knew the words so well to the “dinner-prayer” that her mind could stray and she thought of her perfect Christmas. And her perfect Christmas was dinner being over by a cookie’s scent and lighthearted political conversation (*I could bring up the stalk market, – the new Kentucky!*) and she could discuss Ebola and all the while saying yes and agreeing because, Ms. Norma always said that was the number one rule to having fun and there was Ms. Norma now! Floating by and she said she had Ebola...



Celia woke up before her eyes could open. She listened intently for the downstairs ruckus. For Grammy's simmering pans and the radio voice Mommy called Diane Rehm. But she didn't hear anything, just a rotund emptiness; it was like that sound when snow is falling. When the world holds its breath and Earth asks itself, "*What will happen next?*" And in hearing this nothing, she knew her Perfect Christmas Ever was tip-toeing away from her to hide until next year. But her determination to make this the best Christmas Ever was unbreakable. So naturally, she sat up from her pee-wee nap, arched her head back, and screamed—a shrill piccolo. And, naturally, someone came to her aid. Up the stairs came the sound of feet, heavy feet, Daddy feet. Celia crawled underneath the sheets and her pee-wee body could almost be mistaken for a large wrinkle in the comforter.

"Jesus Christ, Celia, what are you up to?" amused Daddy, "You're gonna give Grammy down there a heart attack."

"Why is it so quiet?" mumbled Celia, she crept out of the covers and stood next to her father a meager 3'5" compared to his 6'1".

"It was so we didn't wake you; dinner's been ready for a good thirty minutes and the cooki—"

"STOP" commanded Celia, her heart went *papit*. "Did you bake the cookies already?"

Papit papit papit.

"No, no." Daddy could tell there was some importance to not baking the cookies. "We only prepared the batter for you. Grammy told me that you wanted that job this year."

Sighing in relief, "Yes. Yes I did."

The perfect Christmas ever was still salvageable! Celia patted Daddy on the waist like she saw other kids do on *Arthur* and flew down to the first floor. She didn't need to give him back his phone; unbeknownst to Celia, Daddy had crept up the stairs and gently licked it from her grasp. She waved to Mommy and went directly to the radio to find Diane Rehm. She did in

two seconds; how could anyone not know that scraggly fry? She skipped over to Grammy doing the crossword by the fireplace, “Grammy! Up Up UP!! It’s Christmas!”

Grammy smiled, “Well of course it is, Sugar. The meal is probably a chilled one by now, I even had to refrigerate the gravy!”

Celia, once again, with goose eggs in her eye sockets, “Is that bad. Is that a bad thing. Grammy.”

“No, Darling,” Grammy rose from her wicker chair, “it actually locks in the flavors quite nicely. We just need to heat it up and it’ll all be all right.”

Celia followed Grammy back into the kitchen and they opened the fridge together. Grammy took out the fruit salad and set it on the counter. Likewise for the potato salad and this year’s dessert they had slaved away on earlier together: A beautiful Coconut Crème Cake the color of Pearl. The Coconut shreds, according to Celia, “made the cake a paper mache wonder.” Grammy shuffled toward the table and began preparing the silverware.

Celia gazed across at her. *Grammy moves so slow.* Celia’s pee-wee hands still clung to the fridge’s silver handle.

“Grammy, the gravy!”

“Yes, baby. Get out the spoon and give it a quick stir! Hurry, we don’t want the bottom to scorch.”

Chills brushed against Celia’s neck from the fridge. She didn’t understand. Hadn’t Grammy said she had put it away to cool?

“Baby, Grammy is here so you are allowed to get near the stove. Okay? Quickly quickly, Darling.” And Grammy found her way toward the stove and peered into the pot. She stared into it like Narcissus and the water. Except for Grammy there was no water, or gravy. The pot had been emptied.

“Grammy, I think we put it in the fridge. To chill it!”

“Ah! Yes, yes we had. Good girl. Chilling it actually locks in the flavors quite nicely.” She made her way back to the refrigerator. She found the proper container and placed it on the marble counter. The Tupperware was the color of putty; she opened it up to show Celia.

“Yuck! What is that? Is that mold?” Celia was disgusted.

On the top of the gravy a thick layer of whitish gray appeared and it trapped the gravy inside. To Celia, it looked unhealthy and unappetizing. It was something that could ruin the Perfect Christmas Ever.

“No, no, Darling. Don’t panic.” Grammy pulled out a spoon from the drawer. This right here is fat. It’s in the gravy all the time, but if you let it sit or you put it in the fridge, it will separate from the rest of the gravy.” She methodically spooned out fat bit by bit into the trash-can while Celia watched, mesmerized.

“So it’s bad for you?” asked Celia.

“Well,” another glob in the trash, “Yes. Yes and no. I think too much of anything is a bad thing and a little bit of everything is a good thing. And that’s why,” Grammy put the spoon down and carried the Tupperware towards the stove, she poured it into the pot, “that’s why I leave in a bit of the fat for the gravy. Not too much though. But just enough to give it that savory, buttery goodness. You need a little bit of the ‘bad stuff’ in order to make it all taste so good.”

And Celia was back on her cooking stool watching the gravy begin to bubble. She could see the bits of fat in there too, like little icebergs in a brown sea. And with Grammy’s hand they began to disappear and melt and this fascinated Celia. She was transfixed, she forgot about the perfect Christmas while she watched the gravy. Familiar words pinched at her ears from the radio, “This is Diane Rehm, today on the stock market, the DOW Jones...”

Celia's chipped and weathered apartment door squeaked open with the turn of the handle; she laughed, "*Even on Christmas I can't even get a break.*" It was around two in the morning, Christmas Day, and she had just come back from one of her friend's Jewish Chinese Food Takeout Party. Ever since she had gotten out of her parents' clutches, she had restricted the Christmas Holiday to one string of tacky lights, a fake tree about three feet high, and a wreath on the door. Christmas had never been a priority for her after her family went to shit. She grabbed a Blue Moon from the fridge and sat at her table, small enough for one person to not feel lonely. Celia opened the bottle and took a few gulps of the chilled booze; she set it down and watched the condensation. The hot meet the cold. She began to cry. "*How did it ever get to this?*"

This was truly her first Christmas alone. Grandma died a few years ago; they said it was Alzheimer's. Her father was long gone with Angela; she hadn't talked with him since the affair came out. Celia and her mother were in a fight about money...mother just kept trying to spend what she didn't have. Celia had no boyfriend this year to fuck with; she had no girlfriend to take her mind off the past's ghost. It was just her; her and everything she never wanted to think about. A few minutes passed...eight...twelve...twenty...thirty. She opened up another beer...and another...and another. The phone rang at 3:30. It was shrill and loud compared to the silence all around; the world was, after all this time, still asking "*What will happen next?*" Celia let the phone go to voicemail.

"It was probably a telemarketer or some Salvation Army girl trying to catch my guilt of no Holiday cheer." But it wasn't either of those. It was Celia's mother.

"Hey Celia...it's me, Mom," heavy breathing into the telephone, Celia remained frozen at the table. "Um, well, I just wanted to see how you were doing...it's Christmas," Celia knew her mother was stalling to see if she would pick up...but she wouldn't. "Merry Christmas, sweetheart," another pause, "Listen, I was looking through my recipe box tonight for Grammy's Coconut Cake recipe; remember that one? You used to say it was like paper maché? That was such a – such a long time ago...well, I found it. But that's not why I'm calling; of course that's –

that's not why I'm calling. I found something else...something that I know you'll love. If you could just pick up the phone-a" Celia took another swig of alcohol; she would not pick up. "Well, I'll tell you anyway regardless...remember *that* Christmas? I like to call that one our Perfect Christmas Ever," Celia rolled her eyes. She remembered her last attempt at trying for an amazing holiday experience. The winter of '2000. She was eight at the time. It was the last Christmas they had as a family. The last one with Grammy, well, Grammy's mind at least. "Yea, well, I found *that* recipe. For the gravy." Celia's ears perked and pricked.

Papit.

"It's a little hard to read, but I thought you'd want it. I know you've been looking for it for quite some time, and I just thought I would share it with you. So if you pick up the phone..." But Celia couldn't pick up the phone. Not in this condition she was in. She wasn't sober; she was depressed, angry, and frustrated with her mother. She was mostly shocked and surprised that the recipe finally turned up. "...here, I'll read it to you, Darling." Celia scrambled to her drawers and pulled out a flashcard and pen.

It took Celia until eight in the morning to make the "Perfect Christmas Ever Gravy," Whether it was fueled by the booze or sheer hopeless romanticism, she didn't know. Celia was determined to get the recipe right and get the gravy done as soon as possible. She looked into the pot, now bubbling with that same thick brown liquid she remembered so distinctly from her childhood; it was one of the only things she still liked that reminded of her Christmas. She breathed it in. The savory scent and the oily hint of fat. She dipped her kitchen ladle into the pot. It was just like Grandma's. She lifted the gravy to her mouth and poured it in. She swallowed. She smiled.

Papit. Papit. Papit. Papit.

Celia had a lot to do this Christmas Day.