

BITWP4

Despite the demon's promises, I found myself alone in our new home. Next door was a half-mile away and my peers were entrenched in their own summer time pursuits with lifelong acquaintances. My father threw himself into work, denying the lingering impact of the monster's bite. My mother found herself carrying more and more of the burden my father could no longer bear.

I begged to see my sister in the city, to escape the drudgery of country living but was rebuked. She needed time to adjust to her new life. They needed me here. I was too young for the city, it wouldn't be safe. I should focus on building my life here.

One benefit of country life, my father loved to say, was how much house we could get. So much empty space for us to fill, even my bedroom was larger. Wasn't that exciting for me? A room the size of two of our bedrooms in our old house and it was all mine. It made me feel small. Alone, of course, didn't mean alone. I was never alone anymore.

Without the ambient light of our village, darkness flooded my room every night. The demon felt more comfortable than ever, gorging himself on all that empty space until he seemed to fill the entire room. In my new home, I could not escape his presence.

I would stay up late into the night, throwing myself into books or games or music, anything to keep him from intruding. Still, his voice echoed off the walls and made me shiver under my blankets. "You shouldn't keep putting off communion," he would say. "Our rituals are sacred." "You'll never survive without me." A lullaby. A psalm.

As I was reading one night, I wondered if this was how my ancestors felt. The cavernous walls of my bedroom only held shadows cast by my small light - my own personal fire. Constant

worry about the monsters prowling outside, seeking safety and security in the only comforts available. What demons haunted them? How did they survive?

Some mornings, I climbed out on the roof and watched the sunlight piercing the dark. A hope that those rays would do the same in the dreams that were coming soon. The air was cool—never cold—and drops of water pooled on the leaves of the tree next to my room. When the sun took up watch the air would be heavy, but at dawn I would feel unburdened. My concerns gasping for life as they were speared by the rising sun. On those days I slept best, or at least hardest.

Some people rose with the rooster's call or the smell of fresh-brewed coffee. That summer I woke with the noonday sun. My afternoons were spent running through the woods behind our house. Routine, I found, had a positive effect. The demon followed me when I first started exploring, laughing as I got winded or tripped over debris on my makeshift paths. By the third week, he started complaining. That I was wasting both our time. That I owed him communion, that was the deal. Remember?

My journeys took me to the borders of our land and our neighbors'. They owned a dog who wore a ubiquitous brown coat, the mark of the mutt. His ears perked up every time I ran past. Then he would give chase, running alongside me with his tail beating the air away. A joyous bark gave way to a wistful cry as I faded back into the brush of our little jungle.

Once, I stopped and kneeled to pet him. He obliged, flopping onto his back and snaking back and forth across the grass. Running my fingers through soft and billowy fur, I inhaled and discovered his rich musk. Examining his collar, I discovered a dark silver dog tag in the shape of a sword. Flipping the tag revealed Dante, the dog's name was Dante.

Pulling my hand back to continue my journey, I was denied. Dante advanced on me, nuzzling my neck and licking my face. His will was so great, I fell onto the grass feeling the blades prick my arm and an irritating tickle bloomed. Love delivered in waves of sloppy kisses on my face and hands, by a tongue that was rough but pleasant and I laughed in response. I gave him a hug and bid him farewell, this time it was accepted.

The next day, Dante ran into the woods with me but stopped as the sunlight was filtered by tree cover. Teeth bared, a snarl on his face and fur raised at his haunches, my mind and eyes raced to find the cause. Was the monster here? Had it come for me? What did the dog see that I couldn't?

I followed the line from Dante's eyes into the brush, squinting at the brambles and fallen limbs, hoping to see what had him so on edge. I cooed trying to soothe him, but stepped back behind the dog's protection. He seemed better equipped to handle whatever lurked in the dark. Memories of my father's mangled body and the beast feeding hounded me. I knew it would come back for me one day. My mother had been attacked in the middle of the day, surrounded by people. How could I survive here, with my only protection being a dog I just met?

Dante's advance was intentional, the front of his body lowering to the ground with each step. He kept his distance from the edges of the underbrush, his growl growing louder with lips curled back and teeth bared. I must also focus on the present.

Then, I saw the eyes. The demon was there, snarling back at my new friend.

"Keep it away," the demon shouted. He seemed to retreat into himself, growing smaller than I could remember. Despite that, his voice cracked like thunder on a clear day. "That foul beast is no friend to you."

“The dog?” I asked, my brow furrowed. I scratched my hair, looking at the diminishing demon and the agitated dog. Laughter burst out, erupting from deep in my stomach so intense it almost hurt. Growling paused, Dante’s eyes flicked up to me and his guard relaxed. He started pacing around my legs, eyes glued to the demon swaddled in thorny vines. “You’re afraid of the dog?”

The demon’s eyes narrowed, his voice firm and flat. “These stupid walks bored me anyway.” He retreated into the brush and I felt a slight chuckle escape. A cool breeze rustled the branches and raised goosebumps on my arm. After that day the demon no longer accompanied me on my runs. I never thought to bring it up and he never spoke of it.

Dante’s owner would sometimes be working in the yard when I came near. She would wave me over to thank me for tiring her dog out. Say she’d never seen him happier or that if she wasn’t careful he’d go home with me. Always laughing with gray hair pulled back into a tight bun wearing blue jean overalls and cracked brown leather work boots. The creases around her eyes looked like a dried out riverbed winding the valley between her cheekbones and brow. Like all the water had evaporated as the sun baked the lands around it.

Not in the way that some girls courted the sun, a vanity that drew the attention of the monster. I remembered how Stacey used to mock their leather, a stark contrast to her porcelain complexion while I was terrified that I would be exposed. Vulnerable. Marked like my mother.

Nothing about her seemed driven by vanity, not that it would have been unwarranted. A sharp jawline, carved with precision. Piercing blue eyes that complimented the mid-afternoon sky. A body built by a lifetime of work. Her confidence unnerved me, how could someone be so comfortable in themselves?

My responses were mumbled, my eyes tracing the ground between us. There was never an escape from the heat of the sun, sweat working to erode its own home across my face. My feet would shuffle to keep balance during my own personal earthquake. I suffered the conversation because Dante was worth it.