The Devil's Bedpost

by Angela Brett

A cellphone vibrates ineffectually against unfeeling skin. One last rivulet of blood slowly oozes down the wall as it dries. The rest of the room is still.

The floor is littered with toiletries. Slivers of soap fissured by scratches. A quarter-full bottle of shampoo, open, ending a trail of shampoo drips. A toothpaste tube sliced open, with smears of blood over an almost invisibly thin layer of blue gel. A pool of cough syrup and blood surrounds a smashed bottle. A toothbrush tipped in blood lies next to the toilet.

A man lies back awkwardly on the toilet, head wedged between the cistern and the wall. His eyes do not see the gruesome manuscript scrawled over the white wall.

The writing starts in neat ridges of blue toothpaste:

I woke up in a winning mood. My birthday… and why not celebrate it? Getting old is a victory against death. I had no deadlines to meet, no reason to stay hunched over my keyboard, pouring my blood and sweat into a new story. I went for a walk by the lake to relax.

As I let my mind wonder, pieces of a dream came back to me. The devil was at my bedside. Just a much darker shadow in the dark room. I knew it was him in the way you sometimes know things in dreams, a mixture of switching perspective and intuition. He told me that he would give me all the best cards. I remember thinking of all the movies I'd seen where people make deals with the devil. Somehow I knew before I asked that I would not have to give my soul in return… just sacrifice other souls somehow. That must have been when I woke up, or went into a deeper sleep.

It was just a dream, but it was a good enough excuse to ask some friends around for poker. I called Jack and we got together a posse.

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“Good to see you've decided to celebrate your birthday, you old bugger,” he said.

The evening started off badly, but soon I was wiping the floor with them. I knew they'd never let me win just because it was my birthday. It was all luck.

“Hey, you know it's funny, I had a dream last night that the devil would give me good cards.”

“Well, you never had much of a soul to begin with,” Jack teased. “Speaking of souls, when are you going to write the world's greatest horror novel?”

I smirked. “You know how I feel about horror.”

At this point, the narrative is obscured by soapy smudges, with smears of faeces. It continues in blood.

I felt suddenly very tired, so I took my winnings and went to bed, leaving my friends to finish their beers and let themselves out.

A loud thump woke me in the middle of the night, kick-starting a thumping headache. I was contemplating getting up to see what it was when I heard a voice.

“I hope you enjoyed your luck tonight,” it croaked.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “Is that you, Jack?”

“You know who I am.”

A chill went through me, followed by a wave of nausea. I thought I could see shadows shifting against the darkness.

“What do you want?”

“Do you remember the deeeeal?” said the voice in a permanent death rattle.

“There was no deal. That was a dream. I was just lu…”

I jumped as the voice interrupted me loudly. “I am not in the business of making dreams! We made a deal.”

“Okay, okay, whatever you want. You want my soul? I warn you, it's not in tip-top shape.”

“Your pitiful soul already belongs to me, and I'm growing weary of keeping it alive. It's time to put it to use.”

I tried to respond, but my mind and body were paralysed.

“You will win more souls over to the side of evil. Enough with your inspirational human interest stories,” He drew out human as though it were an insult. “You will write a horror story that will draw your readers to me through the one thing that truly interests them. Fear.”

“But th…” I cut off my own babbling when I found my mind had not caught up with my quivering lips. Far away, the church bells started to chime.

“It's midnight,” said the voice, “You have until next midnight to write it, or else you die.” He was gone before the last chime was silent.

I lay still for a few minutes, unable to make my hand move to the light switch. Every slight noise made my body spasm with fear.

Eventually I managed to turn on the light. The shadows dispersed, and I was briefly reassured by the normality of my bedroom. I searched for evidence of the intruder. My relief was shattered when I saw his calling card. The four of clubs: the devil's bedpost. Bad luck was in store.

I couldn't sleep after that. But there was no use worrying. ‘I'm a professional writer,' I told myself. ‘I can write whatever I'm assigned to write, for the right price.' And this price was the ultimate. So I put my clothes back on, went to my desk and turned on my computer.

Nothing. No startup chime, no fidgeting hard disk. I riffled through my drawer for a pen. Found a red pen and scratched away at a scrap of paper, embossing without writing. I found five more pens; all were out of ink. A broken pencil and no sharpener. Finally, I found a marker which worked, and sat back down to begin writing.

The only ideas that came were more horribly clichéd than horrific. I'd not read much horror, but what I'd read was mostly a thick coating of gore over a flimsy excuse for a story… like pornography, but with gore instead of sex. I idly wondered whether I could replace one character in a porn film with a zombie and make a passable horror, but decided it would probably still be porn.

A sharp pain in my stomach brought back the real horror of the day. I dashed to the toilet, slammed the door shut and got to the toilet just in time to release a horrifying eruption of shit.

I felt a lot better after that. After waiting twenty minutes or so for aftershocks, I pulled my pants up and went to the door, realising what I'd done as I reached toward it. The inside handle had come off a few days before, and until I got around to replacing it, I had been leaving the door slightly ajar. Now it was firmly closed, and would not open without a handle. I poked around at the mechanism and managed to get a razor handle stuck in there.

There isn't much room for a run-up in this bathroom, but I ran as fast as I could into the door. At the last moment I repositioned myself to avoid being jabbed by the razor, and my head smashed into the door instead.

I regained consciousness some time later, head and shoulders throbbing. It took me a few minutes to remember where I was, and another to gather the sense to observe that the door was still firmly closed. I sat there, dazed, for I don't know how long, until I was roused by the sound of Rick Astley's ‘Never Gonna Give You Up'. I hate that song, and that's why I configured my cellphone to wake me up to it. There was no way I'd stay comfortably in bed with it playing.

8:30 already. I had to get out of this bathroom and start writing this damned horror story. And the solution was in my hand. I'd call Jack. He had a key to the house, so he could just come in and open the toilet door.

I dialled his number and waited for the ringback tone. Click. “Your call can not be connected, because you have insufficient prepay credit. To recharge your…” I hung up and threw the phone at the floor in frustration, then stuffed it back in my pocket with a twinge of guilt. Surely Jack or somebody else would call me eventually. I sat there trying not to think about my predicament.

I almost dozed off, and the voice of the devil came back to menace me in my semi-lucid state. I may be trapped in a bathroom, but

things would be much worse if I didn't write a horror story by midnight.

It occurred to me that I was living as bad a horror as I could come up with, so I resolved to write the story of the last few days. Easy enough. But what with? I'd left the marker outside. I pillaged the medicine cabinet, and was close to giving up when I saw the half-full toothpaste tube by the sink. I swear I heard an angel's chorus when I saw that toothpaste. I was saved. If I applied it carefully with a toothbrush handle, I could write fairly well on the wall.

All went well for a while. I even found myself giggling at the thought of my eventual rescuer seeing a wall covered in pasty horror. But the toothpaste ran out much sooner than I'd hoped. Why couldn't I have written a shorter story?

Again I ransacked the cupboards. I tried to write with shampoo, but it was useless, too liquid and too transparent against the wall. I only managed to clean off some of what I'd already written. I threw it at the door, half hoping that it would miraculously punch a hole in it.

Next I tried scraping into the soap with a razor. It could barely stick to the wall, and didn't show up against the white. I needed something darker. Suddenly I wished that I hadn't flushed all that perfectly good shit down the drain. Fighting a sudden nausea, I dipped my toothbrush into the trails on the side of the bowl and tried writing on the wall with it. This was too much. I coughed up some very un-inklike bile and flushed it all down.

After some more contemplation, I turned my attention back to the toothpaste tube. There was surely still some toothpaste in there, wedged near the top where it couldn't quite be pushed to the opening. I tried slicing it open with a razor, but sliced open my thumb instead.

The shock of the pain was soon followed by the thrill of seeing a dark liquid. I could write with this. Ridiculously macabre, but how else does one write for the devil? It's not as if I'd have to bleed to death. The cut was already starting to heal. I cleaned the end of my toothbrush as well as I could and dipped it into the cut. It didn't take

much blood to write a few letters. I felt a strange delight in writing those first few words in blood. I was in the mind of a killer. I could write horror like this.

My phone bleeped midday. I still had twelve hours. Surely somebody would rescue me in that time, but I had to continue just in case. The devil is not to be played with… another reason why I don't usually write horror.

Whenever I stopped too long to think, my thumb would heal over and I'd have to tear it apart again. Eventually I had done it so much that the pain was unbearable. I was feeling a little lightheaded, but I convinced myself it was from pain and lack of sleep rather than blood loss. It didn't seem like any more blood than I gave to the blood bank every time there was a donation drive. I bandaged the poor thumb and rested a little before making a clean cut in my forearm. I continued like this for hours, periodically bandaging a wound and opening a new one.

It's 11:30 now, and I'm afraid that this story is not horrific enough for its audience. I'm worried that nobody has called me all day. I'm afraid that even if I succeed, I'll stay trapped staring at this ghoulish wallpaper until I die of hunger.

I'm afraid that my latest cut won't stop bleeding.

FUCK… I have to fix my wrist up. THE END. Happy now, Luci

“Hi, this is Ned Stokes. I'm probably writing or taking a bath. Leave a message.”

“Hey, Ned, it's Jack. Written any horror stories lately?” Laughter. “Guess you've figured out it was me by now. Hope it didn't freak you out too much. Nah, who am I kidding? You have to be freaked out to write horror. Anyway, I know you hate horror, but I reckon you'd be good at it. If you wrote something, send it to me, I promise I won't tease.”