

# Through Darkly Tinted Glass

*by* Kevin Hunter

I just wanted to get through that night in one piece--things didn't go as planned from the start.

Denise had called at around eight in the evening and said she wouldn't make it home. She had, had an abrupt meeting scheduled and would have to stay at work at the College, probably overnight. City College was far off from Brooklyn and neither of us had a car to drive. We'd just watched all that about those knockout games down in Mississippi. So she would be staying at a friend's home, near campus, and I'd stay home to take care of little Daniel for the night. He liked macaroni and warm milk for dinner on Fridays. I shouldn't worry about tossing in some bacon strips on the side, because he needed the protein—he ate so rarely and needed it whenever he could get it. I thought it was strange that a boy would eat macaroni so late and an eight year old at that. With the warm milk, the strips of bacon, and that whole thing of tucking him in like a child, it was no wonder the boy was so simple and childish and naïve. At about that age my dad would send me into the backyard into the trees to get wood for the fireplace. We had heating but were poor and using fire was relatively free. And I had to cook for my siblings whenever he couldn't make it and mother was too tired from all the work at the plant to do it herself.

So there I was at eight in the late evening, sitting on a couch of hers and curled up with Twain in the hands, and some good whiskey at my side. And there came little Daniel out from his room, the short little tike still wearing his sky blue, one piece pajamas that she apparently got him for Christmas two years ago. The bottom of the pajamas were a soft padding so that he sounded like ruffling leaves as he moved.

"Allan," he said. His eyes looked a little red and I could tell that he needed sleep. So I said, "Oh, that's right. Its time for dinner isn't it?" He stared at me with those little beady, large and naïve eyes and said, "do you know when my mom will get home? Was that her on the phone?" I was taken back by his abruptness, but I couldn't blame him. He didn't know me, really, and what could I expect from a kid his age? Besides, I had, had a little of the whiskey and was in no mood, after the day, to try and teach the kid about answering adult's questions, and about not being so abrupt with people. Anyway, I would have a lot of opportunities to teach Danny manners later on, if things continued to go well with Denise as they'd gone up to that point. If things went well this little boy would be my son and I'd be able to teach him about a lot of the things my father taught me about getting things done; keeping the promises you keep; protecting your woman and your family, although times were different then, and now women didn't need the protecting anymore; and about how strength is more than a physical trait; how religion poisons everything; and about how one should never marry a catholic girl, even though my mother was catholic and he always seemed to love her, and didn't seem to care when I finally brought Denise over for Thanksgiving dinner a couple weeks before, she being as catholic as they come, proudly carrying a large cross necklace at all times.

So I told Danny about his mother. To say that he was disappointed would be an understatement. I asked him again for that dinner. It seemed like the easy thing to do. I would make the macaroni while reading some more Twain, and sipping some Maker's Mark with every passing chance; and the boy would just sit around the table watching whatever kids watched on the kitchen television. I'd just finish the cheesy pasta, while the bacon was frying and the milk would be warmed up after; then he'd eat the stuff and low and behold it would be done and I could finally go back to finishing up my Twain and my glass of Maker's that was waiting so patiently for me on the couch.

But it wasn't that easy. For one thing, the television was on, and he was watching it mostly, but every now and then, I could feel his eyes focused on my back, watching my movements, surveying the way the bacon sizzled and how long it took me to take the pasta out of the boiling water. Every time it got too much to bare, I turned around to try and catch him, but the little deviant was already back watching the television every time. But I knew he was watching me, and it made the whole thing more than a hassle. So, there was that, and the fact that when I needed some salt and pepper to sprinkle on the bacon, like my father used to do, and some butter for the macaroni, the kid sent me to the moon and back before I was at the right place. I wasn't sure but I thought I could see a little smirk from the corner of his lips every time I opened the wrong damn drawer to more spoons, knives, and some meat thermometers. One time, he started laughing, but when I turned around he was at the television again, holding his sides and letting out loud roars of laughter and looking at me, now, as if to wonder what I was so unnerved about; then only to tell me that the salt was above the fridge with the pepper. I could have used some more drink to make it all more bearable.

The boy had a problem with everything I did. I might have thought it was easy to make macaroni. The instructions on the box were simple enough, and everyone's done it before. Its hard to mess up. But little Danny had about a million problems with it. When I had it all in a plate and down before him, he immediately looked up at me, with a weird look like he'd seen snot up my nose but didn't want to tell me out of fear of seeming rude. Like he was thinking, how do I tell him he's got some real thick stuff up his nose without him getting angry and sending me to bed? He gave me this long look, took a spoonful of the macaroni, and spit it back on his plate! The little deviant, spit the damn macaroni back on his plate, and looked at me real sternly like I was the child and he the parent; and he said, "this isn't right--this isn't like how mom makes it--there's too much cheese--not enough milk--its dry." I was shocked! I had put the right amount of cheese in the thing, and after trying to find the salt and

pepper, and butter, I was not in the mood to be toyed with. I'd been making macaroni and cheese for decades and some little kid with his sky blue pajamas and dead leaves for feet, was not about to tell me that I didn't do it right. I grabbed the macaroni box and set it down before him, so that the recommended ingredients were to his face. I said, "this is how its made, isn't it--and I made it just the way it says--so it can't be dry." He shook his head at this, like the way my father would when I asked him about why the leaders of the world couldn't just stop the fighting with the Germans and ask poor Hitler about what made him so angry. Of course that was all it would take to end all the killing and the conquering—just a little discussion around a tea table with some crackers and open hearts.

So little Danny said, "no this isn't right--my mom never makes it the way it says on the box--she always puts more milk and butter--you just don't know--you just don't get it." And I didn't get it. But annoyingly enough I understood what the kid meant, and felt a little bad for him. He was spending the night with a relative stranger, who he'd only met from time to time, surely not enough to want to spend a night with. Plus there was his mother's being out all night, and how much of a mother's boy he seemed. He must have been going through a lot that night. So I told him I'd make him another batch of macaroni to his liking. He could watch me do it, and tell me how to do it right. That way I couldn't get it wrong, and we wouldn't be wasting more of Denise's money.

There was the bacon still on his plate, and I told him to go on and eat that. "Try it out," I said. "It was my dad's special bacon. He used to give it to me and my brothers every Saturday morning, and when we had enough for it." I slid the plate back to little Danny, and he took one bite of the bacon. Then he spit out my father's bacon, and started to wipe down his tongue liked he'd eaten octopus or something, or fish eggs. Then Danny said, "what the hell was that, crap?" And it wasn't that he said crap, or the fact that part of the bacon he'd spat out landed on my face, and some spit, on my shirt—it wasn't any of that--that got me riled up. It was the way he wiped his tongue so feverishly and angrily and viciously, that set me

off. So I took him by his arm, to his dismay, and dragged him from the kitchen and into his room, where I dropped the plate of food by his desk, near his bed, told him to eat it, then go to bed; and left the room in a huff, with Danny squealing something about an apology and not telling his mother what he'd said.

With all that done, I washed up the dishes and sat back down with my book, and my glass of Maker's that I hadn't finished yet. I let myself sink real deep into the chair. I was reading No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger*, by Twain. Outside, I could tell it was still snowing. By the street lights there were flurries still carrying through the wind. Denise's home was at the bottom floor of one of those three family houses in Brooklyn. And from under the lights one could see the people scurrying through the snow. With the boy locked in his room, most of the house lights were off besides the lamp by my couch, and the heater was on, so it was nice, comfortable and warm. With every sip, the whiskey made me even warmer. It was all so good. The wonderful ramblings of Twain made it that much more perfect. The light from Danny's room went out. I thought, finally.

Then I thought about my father, then. I thought about what it was like on those Saturdays when mother was off from work, and father had a short day at the factory. Rick, and Sam would be fighting for the head seat at the table, and mother would be ignoring it all while reading with her glasses, the news of the day on the paper. Dad would finally come home, rushing in from the heat, or the cold, or the wind, or the rain, calling out that he was there, shaking off the noise from outside, the snow from his jackets, the sweat from his brow, the grease from his hands, the worry from his mind, to come around the table, tell Sam and Rick what was what, kiss mother on the forehead, slap me on the back of the neck and begin to make those salt and pepper bacon strips with the pancakes and the eggs.

I also thought about the night after my first day at Church. I don't actually remember much from the day. We might have all gone out, my mother, brothers and I, to some mall afterwards for food for the night. Of course father had stayed home, and when we got back it

was noticeable that he had been drinking. The smell carried through the house, and mother told the three of us to go up and get ready for bed. And we did, or we would have if they hadn't been so loud that night. We could hear them arguing from our beds, and eventually I got up to sneak out to the staircase to see what was up. The memory was always come and go. Father hadn't known about the church visit. Mother didn't think it was necessary. We hadn't been to Church in so long. She would talk to him about it in the morning, when he could think straight and was right. It was only just one day, and he was making a big fuss over nothing. He was waking up the kids for nothing. Mother was saying all this and he was just sitting there in the chair with a glare in his eyes, his lips quivering.

I wasn't sure why I was thinking of those Saturday mornings, or that night, and I guess I never will. But I was thinking about them that night, fondly between Twain and sips of warm whiskey. Despite it all, the night seemed like it might be saved.

Some time had passed and I got to thinking about Danny. I looked out across the house and saw that his lights were still off. I got up and dragged my way over to his room. I was ready to knock but thought against it, when I heard a muffled sound from inside as if something was moving inside. It was a heavy sound. I leaned up against the door. It came more loudly now, and more clear. A feint crying accompanied the movement. Something like a whimpering dog locked out of his master's home on a cold winter night, waiting at the door, having already clawed and clawed at it for hours to no avail. It was a pathetic sound, a sourness to the ears, and at the time, a stake through the heart all at once. I thought that it was Danny. So, I began to turn his door, carefully.

When it was open just enough for me to peak inside, and without him having heard or noticed a thing, I stopped and tried to peer in at what was going on. Suddenly, the movement stopped. I fumbled by the door, searching for the light-switch but to no avail. What was he doing up so late? He should have been in bed after all. His bed time was ten, and it was definitely passed that, now. What made it worse, was that I could not see where the sound had been coming from.

And I thought, why had it stopped? It was possible that it was his heater, roaring awake again in its cyclical manner. Denise had warned me of it, time and time again. And the crying, it must have come from Danny. He must have been crying to himself, I was thinking, in that weird way. Could I blame him? No, not really. He must have been so lonely in that room, in that darkness; and with his stomach full of foods he did not like. "Danny," I began to whisper, and from inside the room I thought I heard a door creak—it sounded as if it was the closet—when the phone began to ring. I left the door ajar, and could hear the feint crying again, as I picked up the phone. Poor boy, I thought.

"How is he?" asked Denise.

"He's fine," I said. "We had a good night together, and now he's out cold in his room, probably full from all the macaroni and the bacon; and I've been reading all night, right before you called."

"Really? Wow. Well that sounds fantastic. Sounds like you two had a good night."

"A fine night," I said, omitting all that had gone on with the macaroni and the punishment. I figured she had, had a long night, now calling at eleven, and was tired and not needing to know about how her son had acted just yet.

"Well, I just wanted to know that everything was alright," she said. "Did you read him the Moses bed time stories that he likes?"

I paused to think about how to square that one away with the punishments I had given Danny. If I told her that I read him the stories, Danny would tell her something different in the morning. But if I told her I did not, she would want to know why, and I'd have to come up with something good, or else she'd go to the default. Despite my efforts, she did this anyway.

"I know you're not religious Allan, but still, I ask you to do this one thing, and he loves those stories. If you and I are going to be together for as long as your parents have been, we've got to work these things out—we've got to balance things out."

"I know," I said.

"But you didn't read him the stories did you?"

What could I say, besides no. So I said it, and she went on about the balancing and the stories, and more of her efforts, and my lack of religiosity. She did this for some time. She had a way with words and she knew it. So she made sure that everyone else knew it as well.

By the time we finished, some more time had passed. I hung up the phone, now exhausted and defeated, and began to make my way back to my couch. Maybe the night could have been salvaged still. After all the boy had still been asleep.

I noticed lights on in Danny's room, then. I investigated. From inside the room, Danny was up; no longer crying. He was pulling something from under his bed. It was a large red box. It rattled as he carried it to the center of his carpet, opened it up and started to take out all the toy figures that were within it. I thought about opening the door and putting him to bed again; scolding him for getting up when he knew better, and threatening him with his mother's anger. He would pack up those toys with more tears welling up and he'd slouch his way up to his bed. I'd tuck in him and his sky blue pajamas; then I'd turn around with the toy box in hand, walk over to his closet that has the coat hanger with all coats on it, and I'd throw it in there, and lock the door. The lights would go out, and before I'd closed the door, I'd look back and see the tears from his little eyes glistening and shining from the light coming from the window over his bed. Then I'd finally get back to my book, and my whiskey glass that some how still was not finished, and I'd finish it. I'd have done all this, had he not looked so innocent and happy with those toys, on that rug. Had I not heard him whimper in that sorrowful, pathetic way, I would have done all that. But he had cried that way, and I couldn't. Instead, watching him pull out those toys, and set them up in such a way, hiding behind the door so as not to attract his attention, moderating my breath so as not to let him hear me, I felt like a pederast, watching him begin to play. It was an odd and uneasy feeling, to say the least.

He had been in darkness for some time, crying to himself. Lonely. In a stark blackness. It was no wonder he had gotten up and turned



on the light at the center of his room, illuminating the entire space. Then, what else would a child do, especially one like him, but take out some toys, some little people, to play with, to take away that boredom, to give himself purpose. He had those toys, now, and they were set up in an odd way. There were some toys that looked like G.I Joes, or some kind of army thing. Some of the toys were almost doll-like, like a gang of horribly cute little ken dolls thrown to the side. Then there were animal toys, and some cowboy toys and some what must have been African toys, as well. They were certainly black, and barely clothed. But instead of slamming the toys together like what most children did, like what my brothers and I did, he had them all coordinated off into separated regions. I was not sure why, just yet. But it was certainly peculiar. He was just sitting between them all, seemingly fixing the dress of one of his other female dolls. And when he finished with that, he sat between them all, doing nothing, his eyes closed. Suddenly, he shot up, and began to move around with them, in all sorts of ways. The cowboys were fighting the African toys. The doll-house toys seemed apathetic to it all, and did not do too much besides to intermittently jump in, take a blow and then retreat. The G.I Joes came in later, and they fought both the African Toys and the Cowboys. The sounds coming from Danny's mouth would be terrifying if they weren't so endearing. He did every explosion with a deft mastery, the sounds as authentic as a child can make them. The whooshing of the fighter jets. The whirring of the propellers. The cahblaming of the planes downed by their inexperienced pilots--the jokers never had a chance. The women swooning over their husbands, their sons? Then a female soldier emancipating the gender, and triumphing over the males with cafunking gunfire and the duh-duh-duh-duh of her Gatling guns across the battle fields, ripping replaceable limbs and sullyng strong hearts.

It was all a whirl of wonder, and nostalgia and memories. All wonderful, and exuberant, and exciting. There was no chance of my stopping him from playing, not at that moment.

Then there came a time when the battles were nearly over and most of the men and women were dead. The wars had torn the world apart, with the carpet's fibers plucked and non-replaceable toy limbs strewn about, water dashed across the floor, factions having bombed each other during the horrible stand off between the cowboy and African leaders that left all sides with major casualties. It could be described as a horrific scene, albeit an unreal one. But at that moment there were a couple of toys positioned over the body of a dying soldier. They were presumably letting him off in death.

"You were a brave soldier," Danny was saying.

"Was I really?"

"Of course baby, you were the greatest. The greatest."

"Its true Bob, you were the greatest of them all."

"Wow...ach" he was feeling pain from the wound.

"What is it hunny!?" said the doll.

"I can feel it," said the dying soldier. "I can feel it coming."

"What coming?" asked another soldier.

"The coldness, comrade," Danny said this with believable agony in his voice. "I'm feeling cold."

"Ohhhh nooo," cried the doll, and she fainted.

"Good, said the soldier. "I don't want her to see it happen anyway. Its better this way."

Then a doctor toy came out.

"Let it go soldier. You were a strong one, alright. Now its time for you to go into the light. Can you see it?"

"Yeah. Yes I can see it," said the soldier. "I can see it."

"Good, soldier. Go into it. Let god take you. Let him take you into his arms."

Had it been earlier in the evening, or even that night, I wouldn't have cared for what Daniel said. But after all that had happened with the macaroni and the bacon, and all the memories of my father and family, and that night all those years ago; and having seen Danny play in such an imaginative way, with such ingenuity and joy, and intelligence, I could not help but feel like he was now the

perfect son, the icing on the top; and I saw myself in him, and within myself, my father.

I went out into the room now and surprised Danny, shocked him. He dropped his toys on the floor and jumped back onto his bed with such a speed that he seemed more a blur than a boy. The sound of his feet becoming more of a quick sweeping, grating noise across the wood floor as he moved. His eyes were wide and bright. He attempted to apologize, but I would have none of it. I scolded him at length about staying up so late, and of all things to play with toys that his mother must not have known he had; how this was possible, I do not know, but he did not object to that part of the scolding so I must have been on the money. He would put the toys away and clean up the rest of the mess. They would go into his closet, and maybe I would not tell his mother about his having them, or maybe I would convince her that it was OK for him to have them, or maybe I would do something else, entirely unpredictable. That would all depend on what he did after he had finished. Of course it made me feel uncomfortable to blackmail a child like that, but it needed to happen.

As part of our pact, he followed me out into the living room, and into the couch next to me, to listen to me read aloud from pages of *The Mysterious Stranger*. Yes, Twain was technically religious folk, but this work was not exactly pro-anything religious. And did it mean more that a man of faith was ridiculing its organized sections in such a harsh and real way? Of course it did. Would all Twain's musing be lost on the mind of an eight year old, mommy's boy, wearing blue one piece pajamas to bed? Possibly. But it was worth a shot. I took a sip from my whiskey, finally the last drop, and felt the warmth course through my body. It was like lava spreading out down my esophagus, down into my stomach. It ignited my engines and I began to read with great haste and focus, paying attention to enunciate as much as possible, so that little Danny could pick up on every syllable and let them speak to him, as they spoke to me.

It crossed my mind at a point during the reading, that what I was doing was abhorrently wrong, horribly wrong, and unforgivably

wrong. I felt the weight of it on me. It was a sudden black weight that felt as if it had reached up over my neck and down my spine, and constricted my eyes. They felt heavy, now, and the room seemed as though it had become dark, and clouded and wanting of something. But I thought nothing of it. I thought, of course I could not be so drunk from a few sips of whiskey, and all it must just be the lights dimming, or my tired eyes playing with my perceptions. That was all that it was. But for the first time that night, I did not feel warm and there was no whiskey left to fix my troubles. I thought, so much had already transpired, and it was too late anyway: it was only a little reading from a book. What harm could it have brought on?

The thought broke the flow of my reading, and when I glanced down at little Danny, he was sleeping on the seat next to me, all curled up and snug. It was another admirable site. I thought of Sam and Rick when they were little, just like Danny, all tiny and snug in the blankets they carried to bed with them every night. It was all good to reminisce about.

I took Danny up in my arms and carried him into his room, feeling some of the effects from the late night, more so than before. I cleaned up some of his toys that he'd still left out, and packed them into the box. Then the box went into the closet, and out of site. The water from the fallen bottle was cleaned up. The carpet fibers were smoothed to the best of my ability. Everything so that little Danny would not face any troubles come morning.

We would be over with the macaroni, and the bacon. It was his first time, anyway, I thought. He would have many chances to become used to the bacon. Hadn't I reacted negatively to them at first, too? I might have. I might have reacted just the same as he did. It was not all that bad of a reaction anyway. So what if he said, crap. Was that so bad of a word? No, I thought. It was not. I've said much worse, and said much worse when I was his age. Much, much worse. Certainly I reacted worse my first time, I thought, though I could not remember. Because it was all so long ago. But I cleaned up his room, tucked him in to bed, and then began to back out, though not before

turning out the lights. I thought of the image of Danny, having been crying, now with the lights off, and his blue teary eyes, now shining pure and bright through the darkness, with the night's light coming in through the window.

But no! That is not what peered through the night. It was not the bright blue, childish, naïve, wonderful pure light from Danny that glared back at me through the darkness. It was not a blue light, but a bright, yet dark red one. It was not Danny who stood where the closet should be, where the coat hangers should have been. It was a larger, much larger figure, and it towered over me, in that room, giant, and menacing, its eyes large and dark and bright, the light from the window making them roar with anger and malignancy; and those things, his hands, or not, large and strong and brutally figured; and his body, black and veined and pulsing with its lust for me; its hooves, large and broad and certainly hard; enough to wreck me, to tear at me; and its teeth enough to grind at me, to erase me, to remove me. It was this large creature that was there in the darkness, peering through at me, with that low gargling, growling sound coming at me, filling me. It had seen what I had done. Had it always been there? Had it been lurking in that closet the whole time? Even while little Danny was playing with his toys. God! Had it been the reason for Danny's crying. For that pitiful whimpering that emanated from Danny's room? Had Danny seen this horrifying creature, surveying him from afar? Or was it really just here now, for me? To punish me. For coercing a poor young child. For forcing him to eat the bacon, to listen to Twain. For being devious. Ignoring the weight.

And what was this!? It was nodding! Nodding at me. With its wicked mouth grinning, liquid dripping from its corner, horns reaching for the ceiling, his whole body contorted to allow him to fit within such a small space. It was nodding, with its large veined arms outstretched, and his hand gently grazing Danny's hair. It opened its mouth and not a roar, but an all too familiar wailing came from it, betraying its size. It cried out into the darkness, and never have I been more afraid. Then it took one step, leaned forward towards me,

its hands, now, outstretching for me, to grab me, to take me; and then I was on the floor, scrambling to the wall behind, my head ringing loudly, eyes closed, nothing, no thoughts within me, no sound, only consternation, fear, shattering fear.

Then the lights were on, and little Danny was standing behind me. I had not noticed him get up. And past the demon? Had he passed the demon? Had he been the demon? It was not clear. But the room was now lit, and the thing was gone. Or was it only lurking within the coming darkness? The coats hung on their hangers as they should have been. I was breathing, heavily, and Danny got down on one knee, looked me in the eyes, and said, "your breath smells like whiskey."

Although shaken, I managed to get Danny back into bed—of course with all the house lights. Having done that, I sat in the couch, in the living room for some time, before deciding that it was best that I got on with it. I thought it must have been a hallucination. And it was. It was the whiskey. I hadn't drunk it for some time and its effect had grown on me. It was the whiskey, and the stressful day. That's all it was, of course. I took out No. 44, *The Mysterious Stranger*, by Twain, and began to read again in the light. But I didn't pour another glass of whiskey that night. I have other times since, though, and even around little Daniel, the tike and I getting along well now and it goes without saying that I haven't seen that thing again.

