

Demons

by Rob Boone

Michael had become quite accustomed to his morning routine. He woke at seven, made his coffee, and stepped onto the front porch with a steaming cup and a fresh cigarette.

He sat there for ten minutes or so, watching the neighborhood prepare for their day. The kids strolled by, on their way to the schoolbus, at 7:08.

A minute later, a black Taurus with six bumper stickers drove by. Most days, the driver had her black hair pulled into a pony tail.

Then the immaculate white Jeep who always drove a bit too fast for Michael's taste.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, listening to the birds' songs. He was always amazed at the fact that he never heard them until he made a conscious effort to do so.

The alarm on his phone began to chime. 7:15. He walked inside, showered, then dressed in the clothes he had lain out the night before. At 8:05, he was on the road, and by 8:45, he'd reached the office.

The next eight hours would be passed with a smile as he helped customers fill out their tax returns. He enjoyed tax season. It gave him a chance to chat with his customers. He couldn't have done it year-round: he reveled in the solitude that came in the other eight months of the year. Whatever the season, it knew its place, and Michael's place in it.

Five o'clock came, as it always does, and Michael stopped at the gas station on the way home. The cashier knew his brand of cigarette,

but not his name. Michael preferred it that way.

Being a Friday, he stopped at the bank to deposit his check, flirting a bit with the blonde teller who always called him "Mike." He preferred Michael, but he never corrected her.

Michael pulled into the driveway and walked around the southeast corner of the car to the mailbox. He opened it, took out the mail, and began to sift through it, walking towards the house without looking up. When his right foot came down on the first porch step, he felt something other than pavement. He looked up from the mail. It was another foot- an elegant pair of black pumps.

His eyes widened as the letters fell out of his hand, onto the sidewalk.

"Hello, Michael."

He recovered himself, the shock giving way to an almost imperceptible smile.

"Hello, Rebecca."

She was as beautiful as ever, he thought as her soft brown eyes looked up at him from underneath a pillow of bangs.

He did not remember the night they met- he had been far too drunk to remember the party. It was his first frat party at UCLA, and he had been a bit too eager to impress his newly-acquired crew with his drinking skills.

He woke up the next morning with a splitting headache and a small blonde angel at the foot of his bed, reading Jane Austen in paperback.

She served him breakfast in bed- two eggs, sausage, and wheat toast.

Michael had often wondered why she never answered when he asked why she had been there that morning, especially as she insisted that nothing had happened. He never pressed the subject, though.

They spent the next three years together, and during the second year, he proposed. The plans were set: the Episcopal church, the purple lilacs, the three-tiered cake- until Michael received an offer of employment from his father's old friend back home in Maryland. As soon as he graduated, Michael went home.

He never told Rebecca that he was leaving. He simply left. Looking back, he didn't understand why he hadn't had the courage to face her. It had crossed his mind that he was simply not good at confrontation, but he quickly dismissed the thought as nonsense.

He had often wondered what had become of her, but he never imagined she would be sitting on his doorstep fifteen years later with that same mesmerizing, crooked smile.

Michael led her inside, hanging her coat and purse on the coat rack in the foyer as she took a seat on the living room sofa. He began to make his tea — he always had a spicy black when he got home — when Rebecca walked into the kitchen and offered to make it herself.

“You've had a long day. I've been sitting on your porch reading a book for two hours. Sit down and I'll bring it to you.”

Michael took off his shoes and placed them just on the inside of the front door. He noticed the green Mercedes coming around the corner and wondered if the blue Chrysler had been on time: he'd

missed it today.

They'd been sitting on the sofa for two hours, and were working on their third cup of tea when Rebecca suggested that they switch to wine. He told her where to find it, then watched her walk away. She'd put on a few pounds, but only a few, and she wore it well. In fact, she looked better, somehow- more complete.

Michael realized that he'd forgotten to eat dinner, but by now it was a bit too late.

Rebecca came back in with the wine, a seventeen-year-old Brunello de Montalcino. Michael had been saving it for a special occasion, but none had come along.

He asked her, for the third time, why she was there, and got slightly annoyed when she again dodged the question.

After the third glass of wine, Michael again excused himself. He made his way into the bathroom, and caught a glimpse of himself in the vanity mirror as he washed his hands. His eyes were unusually red. Probably just the wine.

He walked back to the living room and, as he reached the entryway from the kitchen, he stopped. Rebecca was standing at the sliding glass door at the back of the room, gazing out. The sun must've been setting, and it was casting a red glow over the entire room. It was an intense red at the doorway, becoming softer as it reached further into the house, until it became a weak pink at the fireplace on the east wall. Michael noticed the way Rebecca's hands and arms seemed to absorb the color.

"Becca, it's wonderful to see you, but for the last time, will you please tell me what you're doing here?"

Rebecca turned slowly to face him, and Michael felt a slight wave of nausea come over him.

"It's doesn't matter, Michael. What matters is that I'm here."

"Okay. Well, then, how long are you here? Where are you going from here? Are you passing through?"

"Relax, Michael. Have another sip of wine."

"Fine." He recognized a feeling of irritation beginning to set in, then brushed it off as he stepped into the living room and lit the fireplace. It was a gas fireplace- all the wonder and beauty of an evening fire with none of the hassle.

He turned the dial to the left-most position, then held in the pilot light. He listened for the familiar click, click, click, then watched as the fire appeared out of thin air.

He turned to Rebecca, still standing in the doorway, and noticed the reflection of the fire dancing in her eyes.

"Why did you leave me, Michael?"

He was taken aback. The conversation had thus far been pleasant, but he knew he would have to answer the question eventually.

"I don't know, Becca. I was uncomfortable out there. I didn't belong with the California crowd. You did, but I didn't. I had to take the life that was given to me. I knew that wouldn't be enough for you. You had to make a life out of nothing. I'm not cut out for that."

She said nothing, and Michael could hear the ticking of his old grandfather clock.

Longer and longer, she stood, not speaking, not moving. Seconds passed. Tick, tick, tick.

“For God's sake, Becca, say something. It was fifteen years ago. It's in the past. Aren't you the one who said that it didn't matter? That you're here now?”

Silence.

“Look, I had to hurt you, either way. I could tell you and hurt you, or not tell you and hurt you. I didn't like either choice. I just picked one, I guess.”

She was looking directly at him, her small chin protruding fiercely towards the floor, her eyes fixed on him, or perhaps on something behind him. Michael felt as if she were staring right through him. Still, she said nothing.

She crossed her arms and reached down to the ends of her blouse — a fairly tight purple number with a chaotic, black abstract print running from sleeve to sleeve across her chest — then pulled it over her head. She took one step towards him, then another, then another. Reaching him, she placed her right hand on his shoulder, then slowly leaned towards him.

He could feel her breath on his ear, for only a moment, as she reached behind him with her left hand, which still held the purple blouse. Turning, Michael realized that she was holding the blouse in the flames.

He leaped backwards, nearly falling onto the coffee table.

“Becca, what the fuck!”

The blouse had caught fire now, and as Rebecca turned towards him,

Michael once again saw the fire in her eyes.

She threw the blouse on the couch, and Michael stood, stunned, for only a second before beginning to kick at the flames with his feet.

“What the fuck are you doing? This is my god damn house!”

By the time his leg began to tire, the last of the flames were out. Michael looked at the couch, and the watermelon-sized ring of torched leather, which filled the room with its unmistakable stench.

“Okay, Becca, you've proven your point.” He cursed the singed hair on his leg and took a step to his left to sit on one of the unharmed sofa cushions.

He put his face in his hands, breathing deeply. She had a right to be angry, of course, and he had yet to tell her that he was sorry for what he'd done. He had to apologize.

He slowly opened his eyes, his hands sliding away from his face.

It took a moment to register what he saw. The entire room was engulfed in flames. Rebecca still stood in the center of it all. She wore no expression whatever.

Michael froze, not knowing what to do.

“What the fuck is wrong with you! FUCK!”

“The past is the past, Michael, and nothing can change it. It's possible that it doesn't even exist. The only evidence — the only thing that makes the past real — is what it leaves behind, the seed that it plants.”

The flames were getting taller, fiercer, and Michael began to feel the

fire's heat on his skin. He ran to the back door, but as soon as he touched the knob to open it, he recoiled. It was too hot. He turned towards the kitchen just as the ceiling began to collapse.

He was trapped.

"Becca, why the fuck are you doing this? I hurt you, but this is my god damned life we're talking about!"

"I am your life, Michael! Fire is your life!"

Michael moved to the center of the room, where only a small square was still untouched by the flames, and it was disappearing quickly.

He cowered down and braced for what was to come, covering his head with his hands, tucking his nose into his arm.

"You're not my life," he sobbed. "You're a fucking demon."

He felt a pull on his hand as she wrenched it from his head. She knelt beside him, her face inching closer to his, until he could taste her breath through the smoke.

"No, Michael. I'm *your* demon."

