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A FRAID OF THE DARK BY SHELLEY LEVESON

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I've always been depressingly level-headed. As a rebellious teen, hopping from party to party, I was the one that made sure we had a ride home, didn't arrive too much past curfew, even extricating friends from compromising positions as necessary. In school, I unflinchingly knew which assignments I could blow off, and which to complete in order to keep a respectable B overall. At university, I majored in mathematics, rather than the more esoteric English Literature or Philosophy. I dabbled in feminist spirituality, but just could never get in touch with the goddess. Nor did I really want to. In short, I favored the concrete and logical and thought the rest really just bullshit, even though I agreed that it was often interesting, engaging and sometimes beautiful.

However, there has always been one private exception to this skepticism, one that I had all but forgotten until an incident a few years ago at my daughter's preschool.

It was Merav's second year of nursery school, she was three, almost four. I loved the school itself, which occupied a small, ramshackle house in a neighborhood of mostly larger, executive-style homes. The weathered wood paneling was a soft blue with a lively Noah's ark mural covering one full side.

The wide, old-fashioned porch formed a welcoming entryway and a spot for moms to gather while we waited to retrieve our children. The school's two classrooms were equally reassuring. Frayed but clean carpeting, curtains in cheerful primary shades, and a wide variety of toys, orderly but not disturbingly so. Merav was, and still is, a sensitive child. Her preschool transition took time, unlike some of her classmates who cheerfully waved goodbye to their tearful parents on the very first day. But her teachers and the school director helped and she thrived under their warm, competent care. I expected to be just as happy with her teacher the second year and I should have been. The other mothers were. Carol* seemed all you could want from someone in a profession that requires tremendous dedication, limitless energy and creative management skills (try getting a bunch of two year olds to share) – for very little pay. She was reasonably experienced, attentive, polite and cheerful. Yet whenever I was around her, I felt agitated, unsettled. The sunny room grew dimmer, the carpets shabbier, the music cloying. I tried to explain it once to a friend and fellow mom. We were sitting in a park not far from the school, watching our daughters clamber up a small slide, only to slip half-way and come down tumbling, laughing into each other.

"Something's not right about her. Like there's this dark cloud around her, distorting things, do you know what I mean?" I asked.

"No," she said, standing up as the girls made it nearly to the top, preparing to dash to their rescue if needed, "but I believe you believe it."

I decided it must be a cultural prejudice on my part. This was a Jewish nursery school; she wasn't Jewish. The parents and staff were generally well-educated; she had only a high school equivalency.

The children clearly felt safe under her care. Chattering to her about their playdates, proudly displaying their messy works of art, asking to have a shoe tied or a jacket zipped. So, gradually, I pushed the feeling aside. It was only after a couple of months, when Merav returned to nursery school following a week's break, that I finally recognized the shroud surrounding Carol. It had filled the house of my best friend in elementary school, Lisa Katz.

Lisa and I were nearly inseparable, although she was eleven months older, a full head taller and athletic to my scrawny bookishness. She had a younger sister Jill whom we teased mercilessly, and an older sister, Cheryl, whom we rarely saw. Once, Cheryl allowed us in her room to admire her new bedspread, fluffy white lace dotted with roses to match her pink carpet. I hated it.

Lisa's house had lots of rules that didn't quite make sense. She owned an amazing dollhouse, with miniature mahogany furniture, working lights and a family complete with twin babies. But the dollhouse wasn't for playing, just looking and arranging. A few times, we asked for and received permission to play with it. We didn't play long. Everything was so neat, the stories already drawn, the mom in the kitchen, the babies in bed, that there was nothing left for us.

At Lisa's, you were allowed to eat in the family room while watching TV, an unheard of privilege in our neighborhood. But you couldn't get a crumb anywhere. I once spilled some soup on the cream-colored carpet.

"Look what you did," said Lisa.

"I'm sorry," I replied, "It was too hot." I moved away from the spill, unsure what to do.

"Look what you did," she repeated, voice higher now, pacing around the spot. "Look what you did. Look what you did!"

I stared at this new Lisa, speechless. The commotion drew her mom into the room and Lisa ran to her, crying, calming down only after we had cleaned up all the evidence. We ate in the kitchen after that.

Sleepovers at Lisa's were the strangest. I had to sleep on the hard floor in a sleeping bag even though Lisa had a large double bed. When I inquired why, when there was clearly enough room, I dimly gathered that it was somehow inappropriate for two nine year old girls to sleep together. Once settled down for the night, there was to be no noise, a rule Lisa herself reminded me of when I would giggle or speak too loudly. Occasionally Lisa forgot herself too, and our voices would rise until her mom came in and gently but firmly quieted us. One time her dad opened the door, his shadowy bulk filling the frame. He didn't say much, just glared, but after that Lisa rolled over, her breathing becoming louder and unnaturally even when I whispered her name.

Many of my friends' homes had rules or freedoms that seemed odd. Meg's house required complete silence while her mom took a nap. Janine's family kept kosher – she brought her own food to birthday parties. Rachel's house was filled with the chaos of four older brothers. And I'm sure my home seemed equally strange, with my younger brother always spying on us and my dad bellowing like a madman if we didn't shut the screen door properly.

But Lisa's was different. Even ordinary girlhood things – playing Barbies, trading stickers, just hanging out – weren't quite as fun. As if a thick blanket smothered our gestures, flattened our words. I didn't really understand why and I didn't question it. But I named it. To myself I called it the Darkness.

In sixth grade, my family moved. Only twenty miles or so, but dependent upon our parents to drive us, this seemed another world. Lisa and I managed to keep in touch for a few years. At one point, I heard that Lisa's sister Cheryl had run away. In high school, I moved with my family to California. I only saw Lisa once after that. I was sixteen, Cheryl's age when she left. Lisa still lived in the same house but they had remodeled and it seemed lighter, more open. I slept in Cheryl's old room, now the guest room. Gone was the frilly bedding, the rose carpeting. Still, trying to fall asleep, I could sense the old Darkness lingering in the corners, waiting to pounce.

Once I had named the Darkness, I noticed it more frequently and in other places. It was particularly strong at my Aunt Joy's home, thickening the air so that I had to strain to breathe. She and my uncle believed in discipline and used a belt to make their point. My cousins, both girls, would taunt each other with it.

“You’d better let me play or I’ll tell mom and you’ll get the strap.”

“You know you’ll get the strap if you don’t stop that.”

I also noticed the Darkness in places I had no connection to, no real knowledge of. A malevolent presence that made my heart quicken and limbs contract. Lurking in the hallway of a manicured estate on our trick-or-treat route. In the home of a family I sometimes babysat for. A quick glimpse in a stranger’s gaze or in a passerby’s hurried stride. Sometimes I would meet their eyes, the spark of recognition intensifying my symptoms until the boundaries of my body became blurred, my self only tentative. Usually I turned away.

As I grew older, the darkness mostly vanished. Or I stopped looking. Either way, I had forgotten about it until Carol showed up at the nursery school. Somehow my childish designation still seemed apt. And, just as when I was a child, my acknowledgment seemed to make it stronger, impossible to ignore. I lingered in the classroom after drop off and re-configured my walking route to pass the school playground, slowing down to an amble to peer through the slatted fence. The children were never alone with one teacher so I wasn’t really concerned about newspaper headline type acts, but rather an overly rough movement, a jeering barb, an accidental twist. Sometimes I imagined the Darkness as an entity in itself, seeping out, pushing in, leaving its stain on my vulnerable daughter and I would stand by her bedside, searching for signs of contagion.

Less than three months into the school year, Carol left. In the next few weeks some details leaked out. She had an abusive boyfriend. She was trying to leave. He had threatened her and had shown up at the nursery school early one morning. Carol resigned. The other parents were shocked; I felt only relief and vindication. She was gone and the sense of menace I had felt was real.

Merav took to her new teacher, a young Israeli transplant, quickly. Her speech became peppered with Hebrew phrases. “*Ani rotza*” (I want), “*B’vakasha*” (please), a strident “*Lo!*” (No!)

My exercise route still went by the playground, but now I passed it in a few long strides, having restarted one of my better college habits, running. Peering hard, I’d catch spliced flashes: Merav pedaling around the yard on the wooden trike, curls flying; Merav cautiously but steadily climbing the rope ladder; Merav and a friend on the see-saw, smiling, laughing. It was on one of these runs, heart thumping, breath strong and regular, legs taut, that I realized my mistake. Too late for Carol or Lisa or my cousins, the truth pounded up through my feet as they connected solidly with the earth, flowed through my limbs with each pump, spread until I could no longer ignore it. The darkness is not the furtiveness or the rage; it is not the anger or the violence. The darkness is its ever present aftermath, pleading to be recognized — fear.

* Some names have been changed.

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Shelley Leveson usually calls San Jose, California home, but is temporarily living in Raanana, Israel with her husband and two daughters. After a decade and a half of writing to sell products or services, she is using this unexpected break in routine to return to writing to simply tell a story. She has a B.S. from the University of California, Santa Cruz in mathematics and psychology. This is her first published story.

