

Deadly Decision

Regina Smeltzer

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Dedication

To Mrs. Jean Weller. Alzheimer's disease may have blotted out your memory of me, but it will never erase my respect for the 8th grade teacher who saw something in me I did not see in myself.

“Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divinations or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritualist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord...”

Deuteronomy 18: 10-12a

1

“Let me tell you right off, I don’t believe in ghosts. I never have and I never will. Not good ones, anyway. But some things are hard to explain. If you have ever considered getting involved in the occult, you need to hear my story. It may change your mind.” ~ Bill Iver

My father’s faith left him the minute the maternity nurse told him I was a boy. He had prayed for a daughter, hoping to prevent another generation of Iver men from having the nightmares. As far as I know, Ralph Iver never spoke to God again.

My dad’s fears proved to be well-founded. At puberty, the Iver dreams began invading my life about once a month. Imprisoned within the confines of sleep, I’d find myself standing on one side of a wide chasm, the dry wind beating me, bending me like a green willow. My life depended on being able to cross the gap and reach the man on horseback on the opposite side. I’d search in vain for anything to use as I shielded my eyes against the swirling sand that bites my skin. In

the distance, the man would lower his head, turn his horse and ride away. In a panic, I'd release the scream that had grown from deep within me. At that point I'd awaken trembling, sweat dripping from my body.

My father's desire to end the nightmares became a reality with the birth of my only child, Trina, twenty-six years ago. When I die the Iver curse will end.



Steam rose from the mouth of my ten-cup thermos as I opened it for another swig. The familiar scent of roasted beans brought back happy memories of driving all night for family vacations when Trina was little and my wife was alive. Nancy died when Trina was ten. I raised Trina alone with the occasional help of my younger sister, Betsy. Now Trina and her husband, Ted, are renovating a historic house in South Carolina in exchange for rent. This short trip from Ohio over spring break from teaching was to prepare me for my construction role during the summer. Besides, I missed my daughter.

Other than to refill my gas tank or to recycle the continuous coffee I consumed, I drove from Ohio to South Carolina without stopping. Used to being alone, I didn't even turn on the radio; I simply watched the pavement roll by, mile after dark mile. Around seven in the morning, the sun broke the monotonous blackness and unfolded orange and pink wisps across the horizon.

A lifetime later, I reached Darlington, and then Cashua Street. Many of the houses on Cashua looked like historic beauties, lovingly restored. I lowered the car window, and warm air swirled around me. A dog

barked and quickly, a second joined in. The smell of someone's barbeque made my stomach growl. It had been hours since I had ingested more than caffeine.

The street numbers increased the farther I went: even numbers on the right, odd on the left. I spotted the house number I was looking for, and then double-checked against the scrap of paper clutched in my hand. This couldn't be the right place; I must have written the house number down wrong. I slowed the car and pulled into the unpaved drive. Trina had said the old Colonial needed work, and Ted had called the place a renovation, but this house looked more like a demolition.

As I picked up the phone to call Trina, my daughter ran through the front door and leaped off the crumbling porch. Her long slender legs gracefully covered the distance between the two of us before I could unwind my six-and-a-half-foot frame out of the car.

Trina wound her arms around my chest. "Dad, I missed you."

I held her tight, resting my cheek on top of her head, enjoying her warmth and the feel of her heartbeat. My daughter. My life. She pulled away before I was ready to let her go.

"Isn't it great?" She spread her free arm toward the crumbling two-story disaster. It reminded me of the neighborhood haunted house from when I was a kid.

With one arm still wrapped around her shoulders, I dragged my free hand across the short stubble on top of my head and looked around. The yard was nothing more than patches of green surrounded by oceans of sand. Scraggly branches, like misshapen arms,

extended from overgrown shrubs that flanked the front of the house. Long strings of Spanish moss dripped from the limbs of an ancient laurel oak, creating a sense of grayness and death, while its towering branches blocked the sun.

Dismay and anger joined hands within my gut. Someone was actually renting this unsafe residence to my daughter.

But the house evoked no fear as I stared at the dilapidated structure. It was just an old house.

And then it happened.

Without warning tension surged through my body, as though a static charge had entered and forgotten to leave. It wound around my heart, pressed my ribs into my lungs, and froze my hands into fists.

Instinctively I knew this sensation came from a higher power. I had never experienced the direct hand of God before. Oh sure, I prayed and believed God could intervene, but He seldom did. Not in my life anyway. God put the world in place, provided the laws of nature, and left us on our own. As for any interaction with Satan, well, he's after bigger fish than me.

I rubbed my tingling arms and willed my galloping heart to slow as I looked for an obvious source of my tension. No stray dogs with bared fangs. No cars careening out of control. But still the feeling of *something about to happen* remained. I ran my hand against the scruffiness of my jaw, more stunned by the experience than fearful.

Trina grabbed my hand, unaware of my state of mind. "Come inside! You've got to see this place."

Ted met us at the door. From the front entry, Trina led us to the parlors. Both flanked opposite sides of the

entry and were filled with the past homeowner's furniture. The scent of arthritis cream still clung to the air. In her characteristic bouncy manner, Trina's cheerful monologue continued as we toured what she and Ted hoped would evolve into a bed and breakfast.

My senses remained on high-alert. Although certain I could handle any situation that arose, the unfamiliar tension clung to my body like an ill-fitting wool sweater, and I squirmed against the itch.

After we had viewed two floors, eight bathrooms and seven bedrooms, my fists loosened and I quit entering each room expecting the boogie man to be hiding behind the door.

Trina had saved the best to last. Only the attic remained. A shop teacher can tell a great deal about a house from the exposed beams in its shell.

As I put my hand on the doorknob, a chill ran down my back. I shook from the cold.

"Dad, what's wrong?" Trina asked from behind me.

I flexed my fingers and swallowed against the fullness in my throat. What was wrong with me, a grown man spooked by an old house? My sister Betsy had been telling me to lay off the caffeine. Perhaps she was right.

"Someone walked on my grave," I said, repeating an axiom often used by my family. Squaring my shoulders, trying to ignore the rush of stories that entered my mind about things that happened in attics, I again grabbed the corroded bronze knob and pulled open the door. Hot, stale air greeted me.

Ted reached around me and flipped on the light. I glanced up the stairs. "Ever see any bats?" I sniffed the air and inhaled the scent of dust and old wallpaper.

"Just outside," Trina replied.

"Bats carry rabies. Be careful when you're cleaning up here."

"Dad, I don't plan on cleaning the attic any time soon. We only moved in a week ago. I haven't had time to finish the downstairs yet!"

I dragged the toe of my athletic shoe across the first step. The unstained wood, worn smooth over the years, still bore the unique chisel-marks of manual labor from a past era. Proud work from proud men. The powdery dust covering the tread was different from the thick, almost oily coat that shrouded the floors and furniture in the unused bedrooms. "Someone's been sweeping. These steps are clean."

Behind me, Trina snorted. "The steps are filthy."

Four dormers and two exposed light bulbs dangling from cords dimly lit the open space. Boxes and trunks covered almost half the floor. Pieces of furniture stood in silent testimony to times past. Odd-shaped objects, hidden beneath mouse-chewed cloths, conjured up images of mummies, gray bones, and deer heads with sightless eyes. Shadows melted together, leaving the impression of one huge monster ready to grab an unwary victim.

Sweat ran down my face; the attic needed ridge vents. No bats hung along the rafters. Floor boards squeaked as Trina and Ted shifted into place behind me. I exhaled. Just a normal old attic.

Something moved across the room.

Bats! I jerked up my arm to protect my head as I scanned the spot where I had seen the movement.

My body went rigid.

Directly across from me were two boys about six or seven years old. One child wore knee pants and a

billowing white shirt reminiscent of a past era. A memory struggled to surface, but the familiarity faded.

This oddly-dressed boy stood close behind a second child who sat on a dirty green blanket and was dressed in jeans and a hooded sweat shirt. A strap encircled his neck. Attached to the strap was a chain, the other end of the chain secured beyond the boy's reach in the dark rafters. As the imprisoned boy turned toward me, the leather band shifted, exposing raw, bleeding skin.

Anger flared within me.

In five quick strides I stood beside the restrained boy.

"It's going to be all right now," I murmured, forcing the words out over my thickened tongue. "Help is here." I reached out to stroke his shoulder.

I yanked back my arm, eyes wide.

My hand had passed through his body.

2

I stumbled backward, my eyes glued to the sitting boy. The child's penetrating stare burned with a message I didn't understand.

My lungs screamed for air but refused to expand.

"Dad, are you all right?" Trina and Ted each grabbed one of my arms.

I inhaled like a man coming back from the dead.

"Did you see that?" I turned to Trina, expecting a duplicate of my horror reflected on her face. Instead she stared at me blankly.

I jerked my gaze back toward the boy, but he was gone, along with the second child, the blanket and the chain. Like a hawk searching for its prey, I scanned the attic. Dust swirled in eddies around the light from the exposed bulbs, arranging their miniscule particles into twisting ropes. Most of the attic remained in long shadows, like silent beckoning fingers.

The space was silent, like a cemetery at midnight, and just like a cemetery, full of places children could hide. But I knew I wouldn't find the boys in any of them.

"Did I see what?" Trina repeated.

Ignoring her, I strained to hear any unusual sound in the shrouded space. The chirp of birds, probably perched outside in attic-level branches, sounded like jack-hammers on the highway. How could tiny creatures create enough noise to pierce my brain? A

driver gunned his car's engine. A dog barked.

From inside, not a sound. Not even a creak or a groan from a settling house to confuse raw, human sensibilities.

Hesitantly I looked down at my arm and then at the hand that had gone through the child's shoulder. I bent my fingers and flexed my wrist. I don't know what I had expected, perhaps a distorted, withered stump, but my body parts appeared as they always had: thick boned with brown hairs scattered on the leathered skin.

Needing to be anywhere but in the attic, I stumbled down the stairs.

Trina and Ted caught up with me on the first floor as I slumped into the worn recliner in the right-hand parlor.

"Dad! You scared us to death." Trina placed her cold hand on my shoulder. "I thought you were having a heart attack or something."

"I'm OK."

"But you ran across the room..."

"I thought I saw something." I closed my eyes. "Just let me sit a few minutes. It was a long drive."

Trina knelt beside me. "I should have let you rest before dragging you through the house. You drove most of the night to get here. I didn't think. I'm sorry."

She pressed her head into my chest, just like when she was younger. My heart swelled, forcing tears to the corners of my eyes. I stroked her hand. "A nap will fix me up fine."

Behind my closed eyes, Trina's and Ted's voices blurred to murmurs. Footsteps retreated down the hall. Even though my body was in a state of collapse, my mind raced. The scene from the attic screamed through

my head, swirling around and around: one boy leaning over a second who was chained to the rafters.

Cold sweat covered my body. I tried to quell the queasiness churning my stomach.

I couldn't have seen ghosts. Ghosts were demons, and intuition told me what I had seen wasn't dangerous. Christians don't see apparitions. That's the stuff of adventure-seekers and new-agers, not rational men. Not God-fearing men.

Then what were they?

In the haze right before sleep, my inherited nightmare and the event in the attic wove together. The boy in the attic wearing an outfit a hundred years old now stood across the chasm in place of the man on the horse. The urgency...something important.



When I woke, evening shadows stretched across the room. For a second—just the briefest blink of time—I felt as though I were in another universe, somewhere alone and removed from all those I loved. Inertia controlled my body, and I sat there, reclined in the leather chair, as much a benign part of the room as the plaster on the wall.

Like morning fog evaporating under the rays of the sun, awareness gradually returned. Left behind was a sense of otherworldliness, a tension that suggested I was not in the right place at the right time; an impression that I had invaded another dimension.

It was the same disconnection that remained after my nightmares.

Trina entered carrying a tray of sandwiches and iced tea. I shook off the disequilibrium and devoured

my food. Trina nibbled at hers.

I debated how to bring up the subject. "Honey, how many times have you been in the attic?"

"Since I haven't *bothered* to clean up there," she said with a grin, "only once before today, when we toured the house."

"Did you see anything strange?"

"All those old boxes and trunks, I'm really curious to find out what's in them, but I've been busy. You wouldn't believe the trash we've moved out in a week. I found newspapers from 1943! I saved some for you; thought you might want to look at them."

She had not seen the boys.

Trina chewed at the corner of her sandwich and stared at me. "Dad, what happened up there? You cried out, and ran across the floor, and then you stumbled backward..."

My daughter's huge hazel eyes pierced my heart. What kind of a place was this? How could I protect my daughter from something I didn't even believe in? And it would be up to me to protect her. Trina might be deeply in love with Ted, but any man who didn't know how to shoot a gun or work a power-saw was useless. And he didn't have a real job. Painting pictures was not man's work.

"You know how I feel about ghosts," I finally said. "The spirits of dead people don't hang around."

Trina started to laugh. "You saw a ghost?" She peered at me more closely. "You're serious. You saw a ghost."

"Little boys. They looked as real as you do right now. One was sitting on the floor and the other one was standing behind him. When I reached out...when I touched the boy... my hand passed right through him,

like he was made of air." The words sounded strange to my ears; I could only imagine how ridiculous the story must seem to Trina.

"What are you saying?"

Headlights of a passing car shined through the lace curtains sending ribbons of light across the room. As quickly as they had appeared, the dancing ribbons were gone. Just like my boys. Is this the way senility begins, with flights of imagination replacing rational thought?

I chose my words carefully. "Think about it, honey. If the souls of *people* don't linger after death, then the apparitions we hear stories about are *something else*. Most haunted house sightings are the results of over-active imaginations...but some have to be true."

"This house is not haunted. God led Ted and me here. Why would He bring us to a house full of ghosts?"

I didn't know. However, I did know that seeing the apparitions was intentional. What connection they had to my nightmares I still didn't know. Maybe none.

"We'll have to tell Ted," Trina said. "He's upstairs. He thought you might want some time alone with me."

Her footsteps made patting sounds as she went down the hall and up the staircase.

All houses make noises, but I listened for strange sounds, anything unusual, out of place. I regretted that I was sitting facing into the room. One of the things Trina had shared with me from a self-defense course she had taken in high school was never put your back to the door. I had always counted on my bulk to keep me safe, but how do you fight something you can't even touch?

Where were the apparitions now? Did they leave when I glanced at Trina? Or were they hiding, waiting...

Footsteps behind me. Nasal breathing.

I stiffened. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I sat perfectly still in a dead man's recliner, the ever-present scent of his liniment invading my nose.

While I held my breath, grateful Trina was gone but at the same time sorry not to have a witness, a young man, early to mid-20s, and slightly built, rounded my chair. Limp blonde hair hung over the collar of his coveralls.

His eyes widened when he saw me.

Was he real or an apparition like the boys? The smell of motor oil and grease mixed with the liniment, creating a pungent swamp scent.

I stared at the man/apparition as he focused unblinking eyes on my face.

More footsteps, this time familiar. Trina and Ted walked into the room. I barely breathed, focusing on the young man, wondering if he would disappear.

"Oh, Mitch, you've met my dad."

I exhaled. *So he's real.*

"Mitch is an auto mechanic," Trina explained. "He used to live here. He helped Mr. Barnett."

"You come for the rest of your things?" Ted asked.

Mitch's surprised expression shifted to one of fearful confusion, almost like he thought I was a ghost. Strange that thought should come to me. Wonder if he has been in the attic?

"Shouldn't take me long," Mitch mumbled. After another searching look in my direction, he shuffled out of the room.

"Mitch really is a nice guy," Trina said. "A little

strange maybe. He came with the house."

"What do you mean, 'He came with the house?'"
What more trouble could come with this place?

"Shortly after Mr. Barnett died, little Jimmy disappeared. Things were just hectic and—"

"Wait a minute." My heart missed a beat. "A kid disappeared?"

"Mrs. Roberts's grandson. She's raising him. His parents were killed in a car accident about five years ago." Trina lowered her voice to a whisper. "About two weeks ago he just didn't come home from school." Tears filmed her eyes, and she reached for her husband's hand. "Ted and I met him a few times before we moved in. Cute boy, very polite. Mrs. Roberts is heartbroken. The whole town is searching for him. Posters with his pictures are hanging everywhere."

Ted slid an arm around his wife's shoulders. "We've been praying that God will protect Jimmy and bring him home."

I scowled. After two weeks, kids didn't usually show up alive, and God doesn't always answer prayer.

"Anyway," Trina said, "back to Mitch. With the police looking everywhere, and you can imagine how upset Mrs. Roberts was, she just let Mitch keep on living here."

"Mrs. Roberts is the, um, lady renting you the house?"

"Right. Mr. Barnett was her husband's uncle. The house belonged to him. Now it belongs to Jimmy...or it might belong to him, if, you know." Trina sat on the sofa. As she tucked her legs beneath her, the aging springs groaned slightly. "When we moved in, Mitch had to find somewhere else to live. He only found a

place two days ago with some guy at the garage.”

“Trina said you saw ghosts in the attic.” Ted settled beside my daughter, the couch protesting more boldly under his weight.

Ted’s raised eyebrows told me Trina had already shared the story. Obviously, our discussion of Mitch was over, and just as obvious, Ted had not seen the ghosts.

Had I hallucinated? No way. It was too real to have been my imagination.

I repeated the story to Ted, unsure if I wanted my son-in-law to dismiss the experience or validate I had seen apparitions. No one prayed or read their Bible more than Ted. He ought to know the answer.

“So who do you think they were?” Ted asked me before I could shoot the same question to him.

“I’m not sure I want to call them a ‘who.’ After all, ‘who’ would indicate they were human.”

Ted and Trina exchanged glances.

“The way you described one of the ghosts,” Ted said, “sounds a lot like Mrs. Roberts’s grandson.”

All my life I had been taught that the Bible was the final authority, but this experience had conflicted my thinking more than I wanted to admit. I’d always believed that lingering souls and Christian teachings are antithetical. And yet I had seen them, two little boys. And now one of them might be the homeowner’s grandson. My brain hurt.

“Maybe we should go back to the attic,” Ted suggested.

Trina glanced at the window. “Not after dark!”

I jumped. Something had bumped my chair.

“I’ll come tomorrow and finish.” Mitch’s voice mumbled from behind me.

What's with this kid? Does he float from one place to another?

Plastic bags rustled. Footsteps shuffled down the hall. The kitchen door banged.

What had Mitch overheard...and why did it feel important?

"I really think we need to go back to the attic tonight, honey." Ted took Trina's hand. "What if there's something up there that can tell us what happened to Jimmy? No one's ever searched the attic."

Trina's brows pulled together. "You're right," she finally said.

A question had been bothering me. "Why didn't either of you see the apparitions? Why just me?"

Ted rubbed his chin. "I don't know. God must have a reason."

I clenched my teeth and fought back the snarl that filled my mouth. *God must have a reason?* Easy words from my faith-filled son-in-law. If you don't know the answer, say 'God has a reason.' If God was responsible for opening my eyes to the apparitions, then God should have revealed them to Ted. Ted was the one with unwavering faith, missionary parents, and all that.

God was so far removed from what I had seen in the attic that it was impossible to imagine His involvement. If human souls don't linger, then the apparitions had to be demons. But I knew what I had seen wasn't evil. So what were they?

The proverbial rug under my feet had been jerked away, and I found myself airborne with no idea where I would land. All my years in church had not prepared me for this experience.

We left the parlor and headed to the last place in

Deadly Decision

the world I wanted to go—the attic. My stomach pushed its way into my throat.

What would the next hour bring?