

# DEEM

PAUL excused himself before dessert. "We'll wait for you," his wife said. Dave leaned back in his chair. He and Paul had just finished a thorough discussion of the election. "All the better," Dave said. "I've eaten enough that I won't be ready for dessert for a while anyway."

"You won't be long, will you honey?" Lois asked.

"I hope not." Paul tried to quench his secret pleasure that their old friends from the student ward were seeing this evidence of his position as bishop's counselor. Still, Dave and Alison had driven out from the city and Paul did regret missing part of their evening.

"Is it a meeting?" Dave asked. Dave still taught the elders' quorum.

Paul paused, his chair pushed back a few inches.

"No, not exactly. We've been having trouble with evil spirits in the ward. Different people have had problems."

Dave looked at him. "Is that right?" he said. He drained the ice water in his goblet.

Alison was staring, Paul noticed. He could see her back reflected in the picture window, a blur against the twinkling lights of the suburb. Her shoulders looked tense and she tilted her head to one side. "Evil spirits?" she asked as if Paul had just led a dinosaur into the dining room.

Paul nodded briefly. She caught his look and was silent.

"So this is a house call then," Dave said. Dave understood that there were things a man couldn't talk about in this position, especially in a mixed group. Of course Paul told Lois some things. But if word spread in the ward about a confidential situation, everyone knew that someone had talked too much to his wife. The bedroom leak, they called it. Well, he could tell them something.

"First we had a sister whose husband deserted her. He ran off with his dental assistant."

A slight gasp from Alison. Dave shook his head.

"Well, he just couldn't take it anymore," Paul said easily. "I guess the kids were always crying, you know. And his wife isn't the best housekeeper. I've seen that myself."

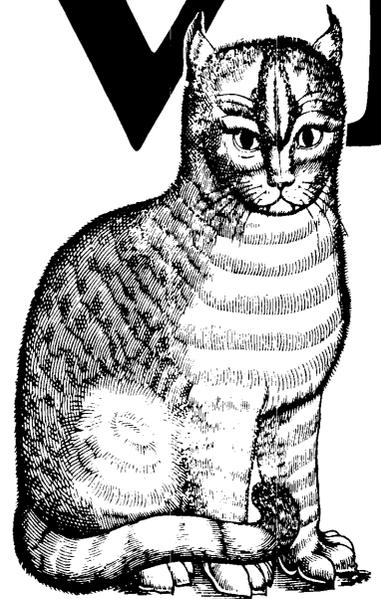
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A Story by  
Linda Sillitoe

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"How old are the children?" asked Alison.

"Oh, small."

"Four-and-a-half, three, and eighteen months," Lois put in. "Not quite as close together as ours."

Lois had hired a babysitter to feed the children a picnic supper downstairs and then put them to bed. No one had heard a sound from them during dinner. The Blackmun's baby slept beside them in her carrier.

"But the evil spirits," Alison said. "What do you mean? Lights swinging, chair rocking, all that sort of thing?"

"No, no." Paul shook his head. He paused. "She just had dark, evil feelings. She seemed angry, even at us. We gave her a blessing."

He sighed and refolded his napkin, carefully matching the edges. "But now there's another one. A stake missionary who lives in our ward called me at work today and asked me to come over tonight. His wife's the same way, very depressed. And I think the bishop visited another sister night before last."

"Kurt is usually out teaching families on Friday night," Lois said softly. "He must be worried."

"He's gone a lot?" Alison asked. They all looked at her.

"You know," Dave said, "we had a fellow in our ward who skipped out on his family. I can't understand how a man can do that."

"This is the third one in our stake," said Paul, "but the first one in the ward. It's awful. Still you know there is always a reason for everything."

# ONS

He glanced at Alison but she was quiet, leaning back in her chair.

"Well, we'll see you soon, honey," Lois said. She began to stack the plates.

But Paul wasn't quite ready to leave the table. He thought that Lois looked perfect tonight in her beige sweater and dark brown slacks. She had used a beige tablecloth and a small, low centerpiece made of weeds sprayed gold and dark brown pine cones. As she bent over the table to collect the plates, Paul thought she looked like a photograph in a magazine. He would remember to tell her privately that he liked the colors and the centerpiece. The truth was, he hated to leave.

"Well," he said, standing up. "See you all later." He put on his suit coat as he walked out the door.

**T**HE night was crisp and the blue afternoon sky darkened to indigo without losing any of its clarity. Leaves skittered gently along the sidewalk. The streetlights drooped over the walks like the reading lamp by his chair in the den. He walked from one pool of light to the next, turning right at the corner. The Jacksons lived two blocks away.

Paul was glad for the dinner and the peaceful night walk. He hoped that this experience wouldn't be as depressing as the last one of its kind. He wanted to share his own well-being without absorbing gloom to take back with him. He knew he should stop talking about it. Confidentiality was part of the job.

When they visited Lynette Strauss last week, they found her huddled in an overstuffed chair, her feet pulled under her. Her eyes looked out like a cat's under a porch. Paul was shocked. He knew Lynette as a cheerful, athletic woman who swept good-naturedly from one activity to the next, her troop of children in tow.

The bishop leaned over her and reached for her hand. "Sister Strauss," he began.

She cried out and pulled her hand away from him. She sat on it. She didn't shake hands when they left, either, Paul remembered.

It was late afternoon and the room was dimming but it was still too early to turn on a lamp. The television in the next room blared cartoons but the kids stayed in the living room with their mother. The bishop's voice fell softly in the room. Paul talked too. Then suddenly a low movement caught the corner of his eye. He looked. A

yellow doll's dress lay crumpled on the carpet. He watched it for a moment. It moved again.

Paul looked at the bishop and then at Lynette. Neither noticed. The bishop was waiting for Lynette to answer a question and she was looking past him at her middle child who sat on the floor unlacing his shoes.

The doll dress moved another inch toward Paul. He rubbed his eyes a little, very discreetly. Then the little boy noticed.

"Samuel!" he yelled and bounded across the room. He threw the fabric into the air and scooped up a small green turtle.

"It's mine!" screamed the little girl. "I was hunting for it."

"Here, catch," her brother shouted and threw the turtle. Paul strained forward with his hand outstretched. The little girl lifted one hand and deflected the turtle into her lap. Lynette did not look at her.

"It's not a good idea to throw turtles," Paul said as conversationally as possible, setting back on the couch.

The children giggled into their hands. Their eyes rolled. Lynette ignored Paul's hand when they stood to say good-bye. He turned and read the framed mottos on the wall to cover the awkwardness. One said "Families are Forever" and the other said "Lengthen Your Stride." He began to nod approvingly, then winced. He felt Lynette's eyes on the back of his neck.

The bishop took his arm and they closed the door gently behind them. Before they reached the steps, there was a crash against the door behind them and noise like glass falling on tile. They glanced at each other and hurried to the car.

Paul shivered a little. He hadn't had time to run today. He would jog home as soon as he finished at the Jacksons', and maybe circle the block once or twice. The bishop let him worry about physical fitness for the ward. The bishop was overweight.

Paul had felt a touch of surprise when Mark Bradshaw was chosen bishop because the Church put such emphasis on health and fitness. He chided himself guiltily. The bishop was a gentle spiritual giant, he told himself. Paul knew he had to work on humility.

But maybe if these girls would get out and run every day it would be good for them. He and Lois read the scriptures first thing in the morning, and then she ran for

fifteen minutes while he showered. He would mention it to the Relief Society.

The Jacksons' yard looked a little unkempt. Kurt painted the house trim in the spring, but the edges of the grass fringed the sidewalks. The children's trikes lay on the lawn. Paul remembered that tomorrow he must prune the shrubs and check with Lois to see if she had ordered the seed catalogs for next year's gardens.

**K**URT opened the door as soon as Paul's finger touched the doorbell. "Thanks for coming. Come on in."

"Glad to do it. How are you, Kurt?"

"I'm fine." They walked into the living room. The room was light and cheerful, though not very tidy. A couple of used towels lay on the floor at Pam's feet and the newspapers were heaped untidily on the end table. Pam sat in a window seat, her face toward the glass. A baby cried monotonously in another room.

"Here, sit down," Kurt said. They both sat on the couch opposite Pam.

"Pam," Kurt said. She didn't seem to hear him.

Paul noticed that their window faced the dark mountains and didn't pick up the suburb lights the way theirs did.

"Well, I hear that you have the Anderson family almost ready for baptism," Paul said.

"It looks good. We've set the tenth as the date. I think they'll make it."

"Great," Paul said. "That's terrific. You must really feel good."

"We're happy about it." Kurt's already ruddy complexion became a little more so. Then they looked at Pam.

One cheek rested on her hand. Her blond hair fell along her shoulders. Her free hand stroked the knee of her jeans absent-mindedly.

She gained weight with the last baby, thought Paul. He remembered when Pam came to a Halloween party as a mummy. She was encased in elastic bandages and her figure was slim and taut. She was working as a registered nurse then, Paul remembered. He and Lois were new in the ward.

"Pam," Kurt said. "Honey?"

She startled and turned toward them. "Oh, hi," she said. Her voice was faint. Her eyes were enormous. They had always bothered Paul, they were so huge and brown. Like a cow's, he thought.

"Hi, Paul."

"How are you, Pam?"

Her mouth twitched as if it would smile but it didn't. "Oh . . ." she said. She looked past them.

"The kids," she said. Her voice was almost a whisper.

"You put Jason and Jeremy to bed. Don't you remember?"

"The baby," she said. "Did you . . .?"

There was a pause. They all heard the baby's steady wail.

"Pam!" Kurt exclaimed. He jumped up and ran out of the room. Paul could hear his voice shouting down the hall but couldn't understand the words. He wondered if he should follow. But Pam seemed to have relaxed and

was looking out the window again.

"I don't believe it," Kurt said. He walked into the room, arms extended full length. One hand circled the baby's torso, the other hand gripped its thigh. The screaming baby dripped on his shoes.

"You left him in the tub! I thought you'd put him to bed, Pam."

Pam took a towel from the floor and wrapped the baby in it carefully. She began to rub his hair. He stuck a fist in his mouth and the howl subsided to a whisper. She wrapped a second towel around him.

"If you had asked me to get the baby out," Kurt said, "I would have been happy to do it. I didn't know he was still in there. You know I was finishing my report."

Paul tried to interject something as Kurt continued, but what could he say? He stared at Pam. She held the baby against her in his terrycloth cocoon and scooted back on the loveseat until her spine touched the window as if she were taking her baby and backing into another room.

"Pam, are you even listening?" Kurt demanded. He paced into the dining room.

The sheer white curtains suddenly billowed out from the window and fluttered toward Paul. After a startled second, Paul realized that a heating vent was behind them. The temperature outside must be dropping.

"Do you see it?" Kurt asked, striding back into the room. "She isn't even with it half the time."

He turned on his heel and left again. In a minute Paul heard water running in the kitchen.

Paul cleared his throat. Pam didn't look at him. He wasn't sure she even remembered he was there. One arm curled around the baby who was falling asleep with his face against her breast. Lois had told him that Pam was pregnant again. Pam's other arm lay across her lap with the hand turned up. Paul could see the narrow blue veins beneath the white skin. Her skin's even fairer than Lois's, he thought.

"Pam," Paul said. She didn't look up. He slid off the couch and squatted in front of her, his face just lower than hers. "Pam, what is it?"

She looked at him then. Her mouth pulled down and her eyes flooded with tears. Behind the tears was some darkness so pain-filled that Paul was astonished. What could be so wrong? Her face twisted as she tried to speak. He had the feeling that she was sparing him some terrible news that would ruin his life. He saw that it was unfor-givable to ask her to speak of it.

She's like a wraith from the underworld, he thought, staring at her in horror. His brain raced, searching for words, any words that would lay to rest this silence. He scooted backwards on to the edge of the couch.

"Don't worry, Paul," she said then, her voice a steady whisper. "Kurt will be right back."

"Sure," Paul said, settling back on the couch. "Sure, Pam." He was weak with relief and horror. He looked at his hands. The house creaked.

"Well, Pam," Kurt said. His voice was calmer. He was in control again. "Paul came over tonight to help me give you a blessing. You just aren't yourself these days. We

want to help you. Okay?"

Pam didn't answer. She was staring at her arm again—no, at her wrist, Paul saw. Paul could see nothing unusual, but Pam's chin shook as she looked at it.

"Pam," Kurt said sharply. She didn't look up. It was as if his voice was pitched in a range she simply didn't hear.

Kurt shrugged and pulled a pen from his shirt pocket. "I have some oil right here," he said, opening a vial at the top of his pen. It was very quiet as he dropped a little into his palm. Then a humming began in the kitchen. A gust of wind threw a handful of grit and leaves against the window.

"Okay," Kurt said.

They moved into position. As Paul prayed he tried to force his own content through his hands, his fingertips, into Pam. He wanted to help whatever it was that haunted her, to infuse her with his own satisfaction. But as he listened to Kurt's voice praying in turn, he felt darkness creep up his hands and wrists like a stain and his blood run like ink. A chill trickled up his backbone. When he opened his eyes the light was harsh and alien.

Pam was motionless. In a minute Paul walked around her and peered at her face. She was still staring at her wrist. He wondered if she had even closed her eyes during the prayer. He touched her hand a second. It was icy and limp. "Goodnight, Pam."

He shook Kurt's hand. It was warm and moist. "We'll see you soon. Keep in touch."

"Thanks for coming over. I'm sure she'll snap out of it. I'm going to hang around most of the day tomorrow and I'll see to it that she gets to Relief Society on Sunday."

"Good thinking," Paul approved. "Maybe you could go for a drive up the canyon tomorrow. Or take her out to lunch. You know."

"Sure," Kurt said. "Thanks again."

**P**AUL filled his lungs with the night air. It was colder but he was so happy to be out of the Jacksons' house that he broke into a jog from happiness as much as anything. He felt sorry for Kurt. The moon was a thin crescent in the sky. Paul could see the circle of the moon's surface, a shadow against the dark sky. The leaves rustled like mice in the gutters.

Well, Pam's not as bad as Lynette Strauss was, Paul thought, as his feet established a rhythm on the pavement. Lynette's kids were entirely out of control, shooting each other with cap guns and falling dead right on the bishop's shoes. Lynette didn't notice or didn't care. Usually she monitored her children's every move.

Only for a few minutes had Paul recognized her as someone he knew. She had leaned forward at one point and looked straight at the bishop. "I want to get a job."

The bishop smiled, encouraged. "I can understand that," he said, "of course you do. But your children aren't even in school yet."

"I can make arrangements," Lynette said. "I may never hear from Jake again."

"No woman has a more important job than being with her kiddies every day. Besides, by the time you pay a babysitter, you won't make much." Lynette looked at

him stonily.

"What kind of job?" asked Paul, thinking maybe there was something she could do at home.

"I worked at a bank before we got married. I think I could go back. I dropped out of school my junior year to help Jake get his degree."

"The Church will help you," the bishop said, "if you'll just care for these children. It's not charity. It's the Lord's way of helping those who need temporary assistance. You've paid your tithing. In a few years you can think about a job."

There was an angry yowl. A small, cream-colored kitten shot from the little boy's hands and streaked across the room. It began to climb a rubber tree plant.

The late afternoon sun glared through the window behind Paul, warming the back of his neck, but the room was full of shadows. As the kitten peered around the trunk, its eyes blazed orange in the dim room. Paul stared. He knew it was a trick of the light but still he squirmed in his chair as that fiery gaze rested on him for a full minute. He tried to see it from another angle, but couldn't. He started to exclaim, then to laugh, but he did neither.

Then the kitten leaped down and pranced across the room. Paul waited. When it brushed his ankle, he bent and snatched it up in one hand. Casually he turned it and looked at its eyes. They were pale blue. The kitten's heart tapped against his palm.

Suddenly Paul felt violence rise inside of him. He wanted to hurl the kitten across the room. Even now he could feel the smack against the wall in the pit of his stomach and along the soles of his feet. The blabbering television, the kids, the untidy room made his head pound. Under every toy, inside every tippy paper airplane lurked darkness like a shadow of his own inadequacy, and he wanted only to be free, to smash, to rage, to blast things through windows.

Lynette had been deep in the shadows of the chair by the time Paul and the bishop rose and prayed with their hands on her head. Paul felt the darkness recede a step or two as he prayed, but even then he sensed that once they left the shadows would press in again.

As Paul jogged around the corner that led down a slight grade to his house, he looked at the blocks of houses. It seemed so futile. How could a few men hope to hold back the darkness in so many houses? A sudden gust blew a newspaper page toward him like a huge, flapping bird and he ducked, breaking his stride.

He spurted into a run. His guests were waiting, his wife and his children were there, and he could see the yellow windows of his house now as square and clean as heaven.

Still, he somehow felt that he brought defeat home with him, that even in his own shining house a rustle would follow him. Or sometimes from the corner of his eye, he would catch a furtive motion. He would have to be on guard, armored against the shadows. At night as Lois slumbered sweetly beside him, he would hear the sly shifting of shoulders in the dark rooms, and the stealthy scouting that never sounded an audible footstep.